



# HEART IN HAND

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Heart in Hand | *Mary Calmes*



# I

I WAS working late, which had been happening a lot lately, but there was always some pressing employee problem that turned into a fire drill if it didn't get handled quickly without missing any steps in the process. Being as I was at the bottom of the human resources department food chain, a generalist not a manager, my desk was the first stop for everything, without fail.

Of course, the one night when I had somewhere else to be was when it took even longer than usual to send out all my e-mails and return voice messages. I was still done earlier than I thought I would be, and even though it was Friday and the traffic would be nuts, I was hoping I could still make the gallery opening. When I was finally ready to go, I was startled to look up from my laptop screen to find Eric Donovan standing in my doorway.

"Shit, Eric." I caught my breath. "You scared the crap outta me."

"Sorry. I asked at the front desk and they said you were still here."

I squinted at him. "Why are you here?"

"'Cause I wanted to talk to you."

"Why not call?"

He cleared his throat, raking his fingers through his thick brown hair.

"Because I can never say what I want to on the phone."

"Okay." I nodded. It was strange but I let it go. "So what do you need?"

"Can you look at me?"

"Yep," I answered even though it took me a minute. I made sure my laptop powered down and then lowered the cover before I gave him my attention.



"It's so good to see you."

I nodded.

He crossed the room, and as he moved, I noticed the smile he was giving me was more leer than anything else. I hated it.

"I always love seeing you in a tie." He smiled at me.

"Very hot."

I was annoyed but forced myself to smile. "What do you want, Eric?"

"Why are you mad?"

"I'm not mad," I told him. "I'm just trying to get out of here, so if you could just tell me what you want, that'd be great."

He cleared his throat. "So I saw you out the other night with a guy. Who—who was that?"

"You saw me when?"

He scoffed. "Can't you keep track of all the guys you go out with?"

"I have friends and family, Eric," I snapped at him, irritated by his presumption that I was sleeping around.

"And if it was last Tuesday, I was out with my cousin Roger and—"

"The guy I saw you with has long blond hair."

"That's Leith." I smiled. "My boyfriend."

"What kind of name is Leith?"

"What's your question about him?"

"I just wanted to know who he was."



I squinted at him. "Which I just told you."

"Simon, I just—who is he?"

"My boyfriend," I repeated.

"Yeah, but I mean, is it, is he—"

"I live with him, it's serious... anything else?"

"It's only been six months since we broke up, and you're already living with somebody? How the hell is that supposed to make me feel?"

"Are you listening to yourself?" I asked. "C'mon, Eric, people move on. It's how things go when you break up with somebody. You both get on with your lives."

"But how do you think you're making me feel?"

"I don't really care," I told him. "We're not together anymore; I don't have to care how you feel."

"That wasn't my choice."

"But it was the one we mutually made," I reminded him.

"I didn't want to."

"But you did." I drove home the point because I wanted him to hear it.

"Simon—"

"C'mon." I cut him off, grabbing my messenger bag, flipping off the light on my desk as I herded him out of the room and locked the door behind me. "I'll walk you out."

"Wait," he almost whined, hand on my shoulder to stop me from moving away from him. "Just—Simon, please let me see you." His voice was soft, pleading.



I shook my head but didn't meet his gaze. I just wanted to be done with it.

He put a hand under my chin, turning my eyes to his.

"Simon, please, I just wanna talk to you. You're killing me here. I mean, I can't do anything, you know? I can't eat; I can't sleep; I'm anxious all the time; I pace everywhere, at home, at work... please. I need to see you. I need to talk to you just for a little while, alright? Please... please."

I lifted my chin out of his hand and stepped back. "Eric, it's not a good idea. We have nothing to talk about. Don't—"

"Don't what? Don't think about you anymore?"

"Yeah."

"Like if I could do that, I wouldn't. I really don't want to be thinking about you, Simon; I want to be in love with Rita."

"Good."

"No, not good, because I'm not. I want you. When I'm in bed with her, all I can think about is when I was in bed with you."

I turned around to walk away. His hand on my arm was tight and strong as he yanked hard to get me to stop. "Aww, man, c'mon, Eric," I groaned.

"No, Simon—shit! I'm out at dinner the other night and I see you with this guy! Did you even see me?"

I shook my head.

"'Cause you were all laughing and having a good time, and... he's got his hands all over you, and it's obvious from how he is, how comfortable he is, that... he's sleeping with you, and thinking about that is making me fuckin' nuts."

"Listen, I—"



"Don't just dismiss me," he said irritably.

"Sorry, wasn't trying to do that."

He took a breath. "I can't believe you just ended it like it was nothing."

"It wasn't nothing, but it wasn't enough," I said, starting down the hall toward the elevator.

"Wait," he groaned, rushing around in front of me, giving me no recourse but to stop or plow into him. "For fuck's sake, Simon, do you care at all?"

"About you?"

"Yeah, about me."

"Like I said before," I sighed heavily, "if you wanna be friends, we can—"

He cut me off. "Something happened."

"What's that?" I asked, more exasperated than concerned.

His eyes flicked to mine. "I figured something out."

"And?"

"I'm not gay," he said in a whisper, stepping closer to me.

I did not want to debate it with him.

He stared into my eyes. "I don't have to be anything I don't want to be. I can choose."

"That's right," I agreed.

"'Cause it wasn't any good."

"What wasn't any good?"



"I tried with another guy...." He trailed off.

But he wasn't gay. Christ.

"Did you hear me?"

"I did," I said instead of "go to hell." I so didn't want to be his therapist, but I'd been through this a lot in my life. It came with my job. "What happened?"

"It was awful."

I looked into his face, and the way his eyes were a little dead, the tone of his voice, the tense shoulders—I couldn't take it. I leaned forward and hugged him. He was stiff in my arms for only seconds before he grabbed me tight. I felt him shaking and heard his breath catch as he buried his face in my shoulder. "Aww, man, I'm sorry."

"I didn't know how patient you were with me... all those times I thought—I mean, I figured it would be the same with anybody... feel the same."

I sighed heavily. What a mess. "Everybody's different.

You should try and—"

"You always went so slow, made sure I was ready and—"

"It's okay." I didn't want to get into what I had or hadn't done.

"It didn't hurt."

Jesus.

"The way you do it, it's not fucking. Why didn't you tell me it wasn't gonna be like that?"

I gave him a final squeeze and tried to pull back. He held on.

"It was so different when we—with us."



"Eric, it's okay." I patted his back, hugged him as tight as I could. "What are you going to do?"

He eased back to look at my face. "I'm gonna marry Rita."

"Good." I nodded.

"But can I see you?"

"When?" Now I was confused.

He just looked into my eyes and then started to lean. I got it.

I smiled gently, easing him away. "No, man, that ain't gonna work."

"Why?"

"'Cause I need more than that. I'll never be something you do on the side."

"Why?"

"I need more."

"How much more?"

"Just the same as everybody else. I won't share."

"So what—you're gonna get married?"

"I might." I smiled because he just didn't get it.

"Someday."

He let out an exasperated breath, rubbed his forehead, and cracked his knuckles one by one. It would have been funny at any other time. "Simon, c'mon, don't—just, can't you just—"

"I gotta go. I have somewhere to be."



"You gotta go meet your guy," he said, his voice hard and flat.

"Yes, I do."

"But I need you, and this new guy, whatever the fuck his name is, can't possibly want you more than I do."

I wasn't listening. Instead, I stepped around him to walk down the hall toward the elevator.

"Simon!"

I kept walking, and again he was suddenly in front of me, barring my path.

"You need to listen to me."

"No," I sighed deeply. "You need to listen to me. All the reasons we broke up are still there, and if you think about it a second, think about it logically, then you'll get it."

"He's trash, Simon!" he yelled at me, grabbing my arm, holding on tight. "I'm the—"

"You don't know him." I ripped my arm free of his grasp.

"And you're not allowed to have an opinion, anyway."

I never got mad, it took so much energy, but he couldn't talk about Leith Haas. No one who didn't love the man got to talk crap about him. I would not allow that.

Wanting to burn off the anger and frustration, I decided to take the stairs instead of the elevator. Ten flights would work off some tension.

"Simon!"

"Go to hell, Eric," I yelled, starting down.

"Stop."



"Can't," I called out to him, ready to take the second flight down.

"Simon, stop and look at me."

When I looked up at him, I realized he had a gun, and it was pointed straight at me. "Oh, Eric, what the hell?"

He closed the distance between us fast. "I want you to just stop and listen to me."

I was silent, waiting.

He took a settling breath, holding the gun on me as he advanced. "Okay. Here's what I want. You go home and tell your new guy, whatever the hell his name is, that you don't wanna see him anymore, and then tonight after I drop Rita off, I'll come by and see you."

"Okay."

"And it'll be just like it was before you broke up with me."

"Sure, Eric," I said, trying to remember everything I had ever seen on TV about living through someone holding a gun on you.

"Cause here's what I think," he said, close enough now to reach out and put his hand on my cheek. "If you could just stop moving, stop talking, just sit and be still—I think you'd realize that there's no one that can take better care of you than me. I mean, I see you and I look at you and I just want you back. Sometimes when I'm screwing Rita, I have to think about your skin so I can come."

I just looked at him.

"It's so hard, 'cause usually you break up with someone, or they break up with you, and it hurts or whatever, but you get over it, ya know?" He raked his fingers through his hair.

"But with you, I can't seem to get my head clear."



"Huh," I breathed, and then I grabbed his wrist, slamming it as hard as I could against the railing.

"Simon!" he screamed.

I slammed it again, and the gun dropped out of his hand. I didn't let go fast enough, and he caught me in the face with his elbow and then his fist. There was blood everywhere. I kicked him in the knee as hard as I could, and when he fell forward, I swept his feet out from under him and he bounced down the flight of stairs. I took the steps in threes to get to him. I was terrified that the fall had killed him. But he got up so fast, I didn't even have time to stop before he grabbed me and threw me up against the wall.

I thought he was going to break my arm, but he punched me in the kidney instead. All I had free was my head, so I hit him with the back of it as hard as I could. I felt him let go and fall against me. I dropped my shoulder, and he went down hard against the floor, the fall knocking him out cold. I walked backward until I was sitting on the steps. I put my head forward and pinched my nose to stop the bleeding. It was over so fast, taking only seconds, and with my adrenaline pumping, I still couldn't feel anything. When my heart stopped pounding in my ears, I flipped open my phone and called Eric's sister, Chloe. I had met her and the rest of her family through Eric. He had introduced me as a friend, and no one had suspected anything different. Before she could start talking, asking me questions, I interrupted and asked for her father. It was all I could think of to do.

Twenty minutes later, Mr. Donovan threw open the door and joined me and his unconscious son in the stairwell. He reached Eric fast. He was still sprawled out on the landing.

"Oh my God!" he gasped, checking his son for signs of life.

"He's fine," I told him, having checked to make sure he was breathing. His pulse was strong and steady; I had just knocked him out cold.

He looked at me holding the sleeve of my dress shirt against my nose.  
"What happened?"



I held up the gun for him, which I had retrieved from the bottom floor, holding it with my other sleeve, making sure to put no prints on it.

"What's going on?" he asked, walking over to me, taking the gun carefully. "Why is my gun here?" He checked it. "It's loaded."

I shrugged. "I have no doubt it's loaded," I said, sounding nasally since my nose was filled with blood.

He took a seat beside me on the stairs. "What's going on, Simon?"

"I have no idea."

Mr. Donovan turned and looked at me. "You want to try again?"

I sighed. "No, sir."

"Tell me the truth."

"It's not my place to tell you the truth," I said, dabbing at my nose, testing for wet blood.

He looked at me, and I knew the moment he understood. His eyes got wide, and then the most defeated look I had ever seen came over him. My dad had never looked like that. The night I told him I was gay, he had listened a long time before he went for a long drive alone.

When he returned, he came into my room and hugged me and told me it was fine. He wanted to know what my life was going to be like, wanted me to be careful in and out of bed, and told me that if I decided it was just a phase that he'd understand that too. Mr. Donovan was devastated; I wanted to kiss my father at that moment. A traditional Korean man, who had emigrated from Seoul when he was a boy, understood that family came first no matter what, and this rich, educated man had missed that lesson completely. I got up and went to the stairs, stepping over Eric on the way.

"Simon, I appreciate you not calling the police. You could have embarrassed my family, but you chose not to. I won't forget that. What can I do for you?"



"Just take him home and keep him away from me, so I don't have to get a restraining order, Mr. Donovan," I told him coolly, staring him down. "I don't want to see him anymore."

He looked away, unable to hold my gaze. I heard Eric moving, asking his father where he was, as I descended the stairs down to the next level and reentered the building. I couldn't take the stairs; I needed to leave fast. I was on the elevator minutes later.

Outside, I ran around the side of the building and threw up in the alley. Not one of my finer moments, but with the adrenaline gone, I was suddenly terrified. I debated long and hard whether to call Leith, but he was at the gallery opening of his latest show. I wanted him to enjoy his night, not leave to come and see me bleed.

When I could, I jogged down the street to a drug store and grabbed a bottle of water before using their bathroom to wash my face. I looked a little better when I came out but would not pass undetected under my boyfriend's careful scrutiny when I showed up at the gallery opening of his latest show. I needed to figure something out.



## II

MY PHONE rang after I got out of the shower.

"Hey," I sighed, checking the clock on my nightstand.

"I'm sorry I'm late. I had to come home and change."

"Oh, so you're still coming?" He sounded so hopeful.

"Absolutely," I assured my boyfriend, rubbing my hair dry. "I just needed to make a quick stop"—because there was blood on my clothes—"but I'm on my way back out."

"Okay, then, hurry up, 'cause I wanna go to dinner after."

"You bet." I smiled into the phone, wincing when I accidentally bumped my lip.

"Simon?"

"Yeah?"

"You alright? You sound stuffed up."

"No, I'm fine; I'll be right there."

"You're at home, you said?"

"Yeah."

He cleared his throat. "Maybe I'll come get you, and we can ride back together."

"Oh no, don't leave, stay there and schmooze. You need to sell something." I chuckled. "I want an elaborate Christmas gift this year."



He snorted out a laugh. "You don't give a crap about that kind of stuff."

And I didn't, but I was trying for chatty.

"I've been mingling all night, trying to be charming and—"

"You're always charming."

"Am I?"

I laughed at him. The man really had no idea how very appealing he was.  
"Yes, dear."

He gave me a less-than-convinced grunt.

"Okay, so I'll be—"

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"'Course, just gimme, like, twenty minutes, okay?"

Silence on the other end.

"Leith?"

"What's wrong?"

"Whaddya mean?"

He took a breath. "I mean I can hear it in your voice that something's up. Please tell me."

I sighed heavily. Never, ever, had I been with a man who could tell just from the sound of my voice, from my silences, even, that something was amiss. But then, I had never been in love with a man who killed demons before, either.

The man in my life, Leith Haas, was a warder, which meant he killed demons as his night job. He was a welder during the day and an artist



whose chosen medium was wrought iron on the side, and at night... at night he hunted and killed the creatures that preyed on men, women, and children. He was one of five warders who were led by the sentinel of San Francisco, Jael Ezran. As I was Leith's hearth, I was one of only a handful of people who could ever go to bed with him and come away unscathed. And all of it had been a revelation and a burden, and exciting and frightening, all at the same time. My personal life had been on a giant rollercoaster since the blond-haired, aqua-eyed man had caught me in his heated gaze. I had been unable to resist him, and I was happy about that every single day. Not that it had been a picnic. We were navigating a relationship that was, by turns, normal and out-of-the-park weird, but he had given a little and I had given a little, and we were, we both agreed, on track to do great things.

"Simon?"

I cleared my throat. "I don't want to ruin your night with my stupid bullshit."

"Baby," he said gently, softly, "you don't have any bullshit; it's one of the many reasons I can't live without you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

I took a deep breath. "Okay, so I had a visit from my ex tonight, at work, and we sort of got into it."

"Got into it how?"

I made a noise in the back of my throat. "He hit me and—"

"Hit you?"

"Yeah and—"

"Simon, how did you let him hit you?"



He was right; it wasn't like I was some small, fragile guy.

I was six-one, I worked out, ran, I was in good shape; I could have kept him off me, but there had been the whole gun situation added to the mix.

"Simon?"

The gun thing would make him nuts.

"Simon? Did he jump you?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"Shit."

"Simon?"

I coughed. "He had a gun."

"I'm sorry?"

"He had a gun," I said, louder that time.

The phone went silent, and I couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't sound stupid.

"He had a gun?"

"Yeah."

Silence.

"Leith?"

"Stay right there."

I groaned loudly. "No, honey, just—"



"Simon, goddamnit! Are you hurt?"

"Just a little."

His shaky breath was followed by the slightest, smallest whimper, and I could hear in his voice everything I was to him.

I had to make a decision, and I was finally going to have to use words. I was terrible at that. Showing the man what he meant to me in bed was easy. Giving voice to those feelings was a whole other story.

"Simon."

"I need you," I confessed, almost moaning, because I did, and he had to know, or he was going to fly apart, broken at the seams. He was vulnerable after hearing that I was hurt, and I responded in a way I normally never did.

Revelations about myself, anything about me, about what I could or could not survive, did or did not need, were not something I did. Spilling my heart, I felt, served no one. Leith had enough people depending on him—victims, his fellow warders, his sentinel; he didn't need to carry me as well. The last thing I ever wanted to be was a burden, but it seemed like maybe he didn't see it the same way that I did. "But I don't want to be—"

"What are you so scared of?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Simon." His breath hitched. "Tell me what you're thinking."

I cleared my throat. "I just don't wanna be one more thing you hafta deal with."

He was silent.

"Leith?"

"For crissakes, Simon, you're the only thing I have that's mine. Everything else is just...." He trailed off. "But you, I chose you."



And he had and I finally got that. His whole life, everything, all of it except me, had been thrust upon him.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, so can you come home and take care of me?"

He sucked in his breath. I didn't think it was that big of a deal.

"Please?"

"Yes," he said, voice cracking with relief, grateful for my admission. "I'll be right there. Don't go anywhere."

"Where would I go?" I teased him, trying to lighten the mood. "I'm already home."

He hung up and I sighed deeply. I was so glad I didn't have to finish getting dressed. After I pulled on a pair of sweats and an old T-shirt, I walked into the kitchen and looked out at the pouring rain. It was nice because I loved rain, how soothing it was, but it also reminded me of Leith, and thinking about him was always good.

Six months ago I had been on my way home and it had been raining, so I ducked into an art gallery until it cleared up. Since I was expected for drinks with a big group, I had no intention of staying, but I was immediately struck by what I saw. The wrought iron sculptures were dark and almost angry, and as I strolled the exhibit, *Transgressions*, it was called, I found myself enjoying the gothic, masculine feel of the creations. I had been in many galleries in the city, but this one was new to me, and I was suddenly very glad that I'd found it.

"What do you think?"

I turned, and there was a man, just slightly taller than me, broad shoulders, lean waist, and long legs. He was muscular but not overly so, toned, defined, with sharp features and an angular face. His curly hair drew my



eye; it was long and dirty-blond, thick and messy, and tumbling past his shoulders down to the middle of his back. It looked wet, like he had been outside in the rain.

"You just get here?" I asked, smiling at him.

"No." His deep-blue-sea eyes got wide. "Why?"

"You got caught in the rain." I gestured at his hair.

"Oh no." He shook his head. "I was at work before I got here, so I had to clean up and make myself presentable."

He was fresh from the shower, which was why he smelled so good, like soap combined with some sort of citrus scent. I wanted to inhale him and see if his skin was still warm underneath his clothes.

"Do you like them?" he asked, licking his lush bottom lip almost nervously.

I had no idea what we... were... talk....

"Do you like the sculptures?"

The way he was looking at me was making it hard to concentrate on anything else. There was hope there, and innocence, and interest, and it was a little overwhelming two seconds after you met a person. I needed to get a hold of myself.

"Do you?"

"I, I think they're actually sort of spooky," I told him honestly, getting my bearings. "And yeah, I like 'em a lot."

Those eyes of his, framed with dark blond lashes, searched mine. I noticed the freckles on his nose and dimples covered by the fine stubble on his cheeks. "You think the sculptures are scary, but you still like them?"

"I do," I confessed, stepping around him, moving to the next piece of art and the next, following the trail down the hall and through the maze. I



wanted to see how creepy it was all going to get, take the full tour.

"Which sculpture do you like best?" he asked from behind me.

"Why?" I smiled, looking over my shoulder at him.

"I'll give it to you."

"Why would you do that? Isn't the point of this for you to sell your work?"

"How'd you know I was the artist?"

"Because you just offered me anything I wanted," I said, watching him as he walked around in front of me.

"Oh yeah." He grinned sheepishly.

"And even if you hadn't, usually only the artist walks up to total strangers and asks them what they think. It's like your art is your kid, you want to know what everyone thinks."

"Yeah, it's pretty lame; we're all a little too externally motivated."

I shrugged. "Who doesn't like to hear praise?"

"But what if people hate it?"

"That's the risk you take if you put it out there."

"It's still stupid."

"It's human," I corrected him, moving on, looking at the next piece, watching as they got more twisted, more sinister.

"Christ," I breathed out when I entered the next room. It was dark, with strange, red-dappled lighting, and I had a feeling I was at the aftermath of a gory battle.



"You keep walking away," he said, and I felt his breath on the back of my neck.

I turned, and he was close, right behind me, eyes glinting in the darkness. He was just slightly taller than my own six-one, so our eyes met and locked.

"I wanted to see how it turned out."

"What?"

"The fight," I told him, turning back to the pieces. "You said you came here from work. What do you do besides the art?"

"I'm a welder," he said, moving to stand beside me. His hands were shoved down in the pockets of his jeans; the sweater vest over the dress shirt looked strange on him, like he should be in board shorts instead, checking out the swells. I wondered what a surfer was doing so far up the coast.

"A welder," I repeated, glancing around before looking back at him. "You're not a soldier? This strikes me as fighting, as good versus evil, that sort of thing."

He nodded and reached out and took hold of the lapel of my suit jacket. "There's no way you're gonna believe this, but I swear it's the truth," he said as his eyes flicked to mine. "I never talk to anybody at these things, I don't, it's not me, but... I... When you came in and you were really looking at the art, not just here to get out of the rain or—"

"I did come in to get out of the rain," I told him honestly.

His shrug was cute. "Yeah, but then you started looking around, and I could tell when you started getting into it."

More than just the man's artwork had me interested.

"Would you maybe want to have dinner with me?"

There was vulnerability in him, so that I didn't doubt him for a minute. He didn't pick up men; he wasn't the type.



He was shy and quiet but there was strength there too. I liked that.

"I'm actually supposed to be meeting friends," I told him regretfully.

"Could you maybe not meet them?" he asked, curling a long piece of hair around his ear to keep it out of his eyes so he could see me.

"Why?"

His eyes studied my face. "I'm Leith," he said, ignoring my question.

"What's your name?"

"Simon."

"Simon." He repeated it, and the sound from the back of his throat, achy, needy, was surprising. I stepped forward, into his space, and heard his breath catch.

"Tell me what you want."

He swallowed hard and I saw it, saw the veins in his neck cord and watched the muscles in his jaw clench. I had never seen such raw, exposed need. I was surprised he wasn't shivering with it.

"Or just tell me what I can do," I said, my voice dropping low, the shudder that finally ran through him making me smile.

The strangled sound he made flipped my stomach over before he lunged at me. His lips sealed over mine, and I immediately felt his tongue pressing for entrance. I opened for him, and I heard his sharply drawn breath before he devoured my mouth. Heat tore through me, and I bucked forward into him when his hand suddenly groped me through my dress pants.

I pulled back because I couldn't breathe and saw the aching desire all over his face.

"This your thing? You attack guys at your gallery openings?"

"I—"



"You're a twisted piece of work, man." I grinned slyly.

He shook his head. "No, listen... I'm not ever like... I'm not sure what's happening."

Lust was what was happening, and since he was plainly not thinking straight, I fisted my hand in his sweater vest and yanked him after me. There was no protest given as I dragged him behind one of the movable partitions of the exhibit and shoved him up against a wall. He moaned as I pressed the painfully hard bulge in my dress pants against the crease of his ass.

"Please," he whimpered, squirming against me.

"What do you want?"

He shuddered hard, flattened his hands on the brick wall, and spread his legs. It was all the invitation I needed. I immediately went to work on his belt and had his jeans and briefs shucked down around his ankles seconds later. As my hands slid over his right cheek, he caught his breath.

His ass was gorgeous, firm and round and muscular with appealing divots in each side. When I knelt behind him, spreading the cheeks so I could see his already fluttering pink hole, he moaned deep and loud.

"What're you... no, wait, you—God!"

When my tongue licked over his opening, he jolted under my touch. Clearly he had not expected the deep rimming he was in for.

"You shouldn't do—"

"Shut up," I said, my voice full of gravel and heat. As I suspected, his sleek skin was still warm from the shower he had taken recently, and he smelled like soap but also, here, musky, earthy, and that was a great big turn-on. When I leaned in, licking and sucking, pushing my tongue in deeper with every stroke, tasting, the other hand moving around front to fist his cock, I heard a low groan of unmistakable, up-from-his-gut pleasure.



"No one ever... ever... oh please."

I wished I had lube so there would just be the slip and slide, but what was on the condom in my breast pocket was all there was. So I pushed more saliva into his clasping channel and then added a finger. The ring of muscles was tight, but between my tongue and my persistent press inside of him, it slowly loosened. When I curled my finger forward and stroked over his gland, I heard the cry of longing.

"Please." His breath hitched, and I felt the surge of power wash through me. I was driving the beautiful, sensual man right out of his mind. "I'm gonna come if you don't stop."

The threat had no effect on me whatsoever. I added a second finger that slid in easily, and as he levered back and forth against me, I began gently scissoring them apart inside him.

Watching my fingers disappear into his tight round ass, over and over, was making it hard to breathe. I felt his muscles contracting, felt the velvety walls clenching around the invasion of my flesh inside his, and knew he was moments away from release.

"I wanna come with you buried inside me," he gasped.

"Please... fuck me."

He was lucky I never left home, or my office, without a condom. I took some grief from friends, keeping a box of condoms in my top desk drawer, but you never knew where you could end up after work. I would never second-guess myself again.

Letting him go, I moved fast, unbuckling my belt, working the zipper, and pushing my pants down just enough to let my hard, dripping cock out. I almost came just sheathing myself in latex, but the promise of his ass was too great. I wanted to be buried to my balls in him.

"Please," he whimpered, the begging so sweet from a man who had been mostly self-possessed when we were discussing his art just a short time



before. Watching him come apart from my attention had me shaking.

Hands on him, I lined up my dick with his hole, spread his cheeks, and shoved forward in one long, hard thrust, impaling him in a brutal plunge.

"Simon!"

That sounded good. My name torn from the man's chest sounded very good.

"Oh God, please."

The begging was not necessary. One hand in his thick, curly hair, I yanked hard, bowing his back as I pulled out only to pound back inside seconds later. He felt so good, so slick, so hot, so tight, and I hammered into him as hard as I could.

"Fuck!" he growled, "Simon... oh God, baby, please."

I liked the "baby"; it was nice. Seeing my long, thick cock slide in and out of his ass, watching him take all of me and moan for more, rolled my stomach, sending a sizzling pulse through me.

"Simon! Don't stop, please don't stop. I'm gonna come..."

I wanna come."

Good to hear, good to know, and as I drove in and out of the saliva-slicked, fluttering hole, I bent forward and bit down into his shoulder.

"Harder." His voice was sexy and low and dark, like maybe it had never occurred to him that being manhandled and marked during sex would do it for him. "I wanna feel you deeper."

But I knew he was close, and so when I leaned forward, changing my angle, dragging my throbbing cock over his prostate, grasping his dripping shaft at the same time, he shot his load over my fingers, my wrist, and onto the dark red bricks. It was hot and so was the man.



He chanted my name as I rode out the orgasm that tore through him, my balls slapping against his ass, feeling his rippling muscles contracting around me, squeezing me tight.

When I came, seconds later, I filled the condom and wished, for the first time in my life, that I was filling the man's channel instead. The idea of my semen coating his insides, of having my come dripping down his thighs, was the most erotic thing I could think of.

As we stood there together, heaving, panting, him with a final shudder as he leaned his head against the brick and me bracing myself against the wall, I eased gently, tenderly from his body.

"I miss you already," he whispered.

I smiled as I slid the condom from my cock, tied it off, and tossed it into the huge empty garbage can someone had hidden behind the movable wall. It was probably there for cleanup later on but served perfectly at that moment.

Leaning back, adjusting myself, pulling up my briefs and dress pants, belt buckle jingling, I was surprised to feel his hands on my face. I lifted my eyes and found him staring.

"What?" I smiled at him, not sure how comfortable I was with the scrutiny being leveled at me.

"You're fine." He breathed out long and deep, his face breaking into the most beautiful smile I had ever been gifted with.

I was touched by the depth of his happiness. "Why wouldn't I be fine?" I tried to tease him but only succeeded in having him step forward, into me.

He looked at my hair and my face, could not stop staring deeply into my eyes, and let his hands linger on the sides of my neck.

"Am I all inventoried now?" I teased even though it was nice, his overwhelming interest. "Why the concern about my well-being?"

"Come home with me and I'll tell you."



But I needed to give him his out. "Oh no, you don't have—"

"Simon." His breath caught. "I want to eat with you and talk to you and take you home and take you to bed and sleep with you. Please let me. Please."

It should have been scary, how adamant he was, how insistent, how passionate. But instead it just made me feel wanted, and I liked that. I tended to pick men who were either in the closet or who only wanted me for the night. I wondered, oddly, if my luck had just finally changed with a chance encounter with a stranger.

"You should stay here," I told him, raking my fingers through my hair. "And hope to God no one heard us way back here."

"No one's even really here yet," he told me. "And besides, I put a sign across the entrance before I followed you in here."

"Really? I looked easy, did I?"

He coughed nervously before I got a shy smile. "I was actually just hoping to talk to you."

I nodded. "Do you think maybe I could get your number?"

"No."

"No?" Frankly, from how he was looking at me, his response surprised me. I had thought he'd be up for seeing me again. "Are you—"

"No, I mean, don't go," he pleaded softly.

It was his eyes, again, that had me. They were so liquid and dark and the color of the deepest, bluest part of the ocean, a sort of heated aqua, and they were on me, swallowing me, and I was held there and caught without hope of release. As though I wanted any, as though I wanted to be free. I had never been looked at the way he was looking at me, like I was special, like he would not take me for granted.



So I agreed not to leave by myself but to instead go with him and blow off my friends. When we were on the street, he took hold of my hand. He laced his fingers into mine and spoke low and soft, telling me about his favorite Italian restaurant and the smooth bossa nova they played there. It was in North Beach, and his friend Malic had been the first one to take him.

At dinner he watched me and listened and told me that my charcoal-gray eyes were the color of solder when it heated.

"Is that good?" I asked, smiling at him.

"Yes," he said, his voice low and husky.

I studied him: his finely cut features, the high cheekbones, how strong his hands were, the roped veins in them. I liked the bracelets he was wearing, leather and hemp, another made of a metal I couldn't place that I later learned was recycled material. They were artistic, like him.

"You're very perceptive."

I snorted out a laugh. Never had I been given that compliment.

"You are," he said with a chuckle, signaling the waiter to bring me another beer. "You knew exactly what you were seeing at the gallery."

"Did I?"

"Yessir."

I nodded, and he tipped his head, studying me.

"What?"

He confessed that he had never seen hair so dark black that there were actually blue highlights in it. I started to say something dumb, because self-deprecation came easy for me, but his hand on my cheek stopped me, silenced me, and his fingers slid around the back of my neck and up into my hair. I liked the possessive yank forward as he made sure I was really looking at him.



"I can't wait to get you home."

The way he said, it, staring at my mouth, his eyes heavy-lidded with need, had me wanting it just as bad. And it wasn't that he was so gorgeous—I had met more beautiful men in my life—but when he looked at me, eyes flicking to mine, staring, there was an intensity there that took my breath away. He wanted me and no one else would do. I liked that. I liked it a lot.

I stayed all weekend, in his bed, and when Sunday night rolled around, I told him that I had to go home. I couldn't actually just wear his sweats and his T-shirts forever; I had to get ready for Monday, get ready for work, and go back to my life.

But that wasn't what he wanted. He needed me to move in, and so I was made to wait as he made a call.

It got so weird after that, off-the-chart strange, and I would have run from anyone else. But for him I stayed.

Twenty minutes later, I met the biggest man I had ever seen in my life, the sentinel Jael Ezran. I fell into a world I never even suspected existed except on TV and in movies. I was scared at first, overwhelmed, and it took me a week after the man stopped talking and I finally left to process everything.

Demons? Warders? It was insane.

Leith fought creatures from hell and he expected me to simply accept that it was real, take it on faith. It was too much to ask.

And not.

It was the way he had looked at me, while his sentinel was speaking, with hope and desire all rolled up together.

How could I not believe him?

In the end, it was Leith, with his persistence and his absolute belief and need, that won me over. He stalked me in his sweet, cheerful way, showing up wherever I was, waving, grinning, always the happiest man in the world



just to see me. I had never been wanted like he wanted me. He had to have me be his hearth, his home, the grounding, centering presence in his world. I was *necessary*.

I understood what I was truly being asked for: to share his life, his secret, to be both his present and his future. His hope was to never open his front door at the end of the day and not have me there, or at least to have the promise of me there soon. As I was already kind of crazy about him myself, I agreed to move in.

And it was fast, scary, crazy fast, but when he was there, waiting for me after work, oozing happy like a kid at Christmas, ready to start his life with me in it, I was sold. He wanted to meet my family, my friends, and dive right into the deep end, because he was absolutely sure I was it.

I liked being *it*. I had no regrets.

The light caught the blade of a sword, Leith's sword, where it rested on the rack whenever it wasn't in use, and that visual brought me back to the present. It was a beautiful, elegant weapon, a Turkish kilij. The saber was both deadly and decorative, and when my boyfriend slid it into the scabbard whenever he left our home to patrol, I shivered every time. He was a powerful man but with the sword, he took my breath away. I crossed the room to look at it and realized that just seeing it there soothed me.

Exhaling deeply, I found that I really needed to lie down.

My head hurt and I was exhausted. I had no idea how Leith and the others squared off against demons on a daily basis.

Fighting took a hell of a lot out of you. Once I crawled into bed, I inhaled my boyfriend's scent on the sheets. I didn't even think I'd closed my eyes.



### III

IT WAS raining outside, and I was warm in bed, and something more... something better... and then I felt the soft lips slowly trailing up my spine. It felt so good.

"Finally," I griped as I shivered under him, smiling.

"I should have been worried about you first, but I was annoyed that you were late, and then I was pissed that I had to call you, and then you said what happened and.... Shit.

I'm so scared that you're gonna leave me, and now I'm just so ashamed, Simon. I'm so sorry."

It was an avalanche of words from him; usually he didn't ramble.

Wait. Leave him? "What the hell are you talking about?"

I asked, trying to roll over.

He held me still with a hand on the small of my back.

"You've been gone so much lately, and I hardly see you, and when I do see you, all I do is complain, and then you get mad and we fight and—"

"I'm working on fixing that problem," I soothed him. He was right; it was turning into a vicious cycle that could be fatal if something didn't give. If I didn't give. "I promise."

"Really?" He sounded surprised.

"Course. I miss you as much as you miss me, idiot.

Why wouldn't I? I love you."



The choked whimper made me smile. "I love you too, more than you know."

"So I'm glad you're home," I said lightly. "You wanna fool around?"

"Shut up," he growled, and I felt his hair brush over my shoulders, felt his lips, again, on the small of my back.

"Leith," I breathed out.

His hands slid up both sides of my body, his mouth on my skin. The kisses were light but searing, and I felt every single one. When he sucked, mouth open, tongue licking, I gasped.

"Forgive me for doubting your feelings," he breathed over my skin. "I'm an idiot and I don't deserve you."

"Yes, you do," I said, shifting because my cock was hardening, moving under his hands. "It's me... I'm the—"

"You're honest, Simon. You always tell me exactly what you can and cannot do. You have no idea how great that really is. I never have to guess where I stand."

"Good," I said, still sleepy. I could hear the sand in my voice.

He laid his cheek between my shoulder blades and let out a deep breath.

"God, I was so scared," he told me, and his breathing sounded shaky.

"It's okay, I'm okay." I rolled over, and he reached for the light on the nightstand at the same time. I wanted to get naked, but the look on his face was suddenly not conducive to sex. He was horrified.

"Oh God, honey... Jesus, look at your eyes and your lip and...." His hands were all over me, yanking at my clothes, lifting the T-shirt. It should have hurt, but even as scared as he sounded, he was gentle, so gentle and careful with me because I was the man he loved.



"I'm fine." I chuckled because my relief that he was there, with me, was great. I didn't realize until that moment that the whole event was more traumatic than I had yet to process.

"Oh shit," he cried, his hands pushing the T-shirt further up, his fingers trailing over my skin. When they touched the bruises, I shivered hard. There was no mistaking that I had been attacked. Anyone could see that.

"Simon... baby—" He pulled the T-shirt up and over my head.

I couldn't contain my smile.

"Christ."

I took his face in my hands, which stilled him completely. "I like you all worried about me," I said, easing him down to brush my lips over his. "It's very nice."

He trembled under my hands, and I smiled, seeing the reaction. The man had it bad for me, and the way he closed his eyes when I kissed him, wrapped his hands around my wrists, and whined in the back of his throat let me know that the sight of me roughed up was kind of doing it for him.

"You're getting off on seeing me manhandled," I teased him.

"No," he corrected me, his eyes opening to only slits, glazed and dreamy. "What I like is you confessing that you needed me... finally."

"Finally? What?"

He stared deeply into my eyes. "You're so strong all the time, so independent, and sometimes I'm not sure if I'm important to you at all."

"You just told me I was honest and you always know where you stand so —"

"That's not what I mean. You want me—sexually. I know that 'cause you show it, but needing me to be with you and then telling me is a whole other thing."



"Leith—"

"But tonight you finally said you did. Tonight...." His breath caught.  
"Simon... I was necessary."

When I rolled him over on his back, his moan of pleasure could not be missed.

"Which doesn't mean that I'm so happy that I'm not gonna kill this guy... your ex... Eric something."

"Baby—"

"Nobody puts their hands on you except me."

And the way he said it, the way his eyes hardened, was very sexy.

I rubbed against him, pressing my groin to his as I covered his face with kisses—his eyes, his nose, his throat, and finally his lips—I kissed everywhere, wanting him badly.

"Oh God," he groaned, arching up into me. "You gotta stop, you're hurt."

I wasn't hurt enough not to jump him.

"Simon," he whined.

I moved a hand to his belt buckle to begin the process of getting him out of his skintight jeans, and he tried to protest, worried about me, even though he was panting and breathless. When I slanted my mouth down over his, he went boneless under me.

The kiss was scorching and wet. I missed nothing, sucking, licking, tasting, biting, and making sure he felt the overwhelming desire mixed with love. My tongue tangled with his, teasing, pushing, and the deep whimper of need, up from his soul, made me smile against his silky, supple lips. The man had the softest lips I had ever kissed, and he tasted like honey.



"Oh God, Simon, please," he begged me when he tore his mouth from mine so he could breathe.

"Please what?" I asked, having unbuckled his belt and gone to work on his button-fly jeans.

"I need... I...." His eyes fluttered shut as he was assaulted by the sensation of my hand slipping under the waistband of his briefs, slipping over the velvet length of hot flesh.

"Leith," I whispered, pressing kisses to the base of his throat.

"I need you."

And I knew that even as I fisted my hand around his hard, leaking shaft.

He bucked up off the bed, trying to lift up higher, wanting to be closer to me. "Please, Simon, fuck me so hard that I come screaming your name and then hold me after all night long."

I kissed him again, slowly, sucking on his tongue, stroking his dripping cock at the same time. "You want me bad."

"Yes." His voice cracked as his glazed eyes drifted open.

He lifted his hips up off the bed so I could slide the stubborn jeans over his beautiful, round ass. I smiled when lube was shoved at me. He had pulled it from under his pillow, left there from the morning. He liked to start his day with me bending him over the bed. I never argued.

I smiled down into his dark, wet, hungry eyes. "Take off your T-shirt. I wanna feel your skin on mine."

He pulled it roughly up over his head, his breath hitching as he looked up at me. Gently, I eased his legs down flat. The look of confusion that came over his face made me smile. When I climbed over him, straddling his thighs, his eyes got huge.

"Simon, you—"



"Stop." I quieted him, flipping open the cap on the lube, squeezing it into my palm. When I fisted his cock in my hand, he bucked up into me.

"What're you doing? Why're you—"

"You know what I love about us?"

All I got was a raw groan of whimpering need.

"I love that we can be whatever the other guy needs whenever he needs it." Rising to my knees, I lined his cock up with my entrance. "And tonight I need you inside me." It was not his favorite thing, to top, and I didn't normally ask it of him, but there were times, like this one, when I needed to be claimed instead of the other way around.

"Simon," he gasped, and his hand clenched on my thigh stilled me. "I don't want to hurt you or—"

"Do I hurt you?" I asked him, my voice low and husky.

"No, but—"

"Please." My voice bottomed out as I slowly, gently lowered myself onto the long, hard, thick length of him. Leith had a beautiful cock, which I never failed to mention to him whenever I took him inside or down the back of my throat.

"Oh yes," I whispered.

"Simon," he gasped, hands clawing into the bedsheet, struggling so hard not to move, not to drive up into me.

There came the slow burn that accompanied the stretching and filling, always there at the beginning, before it slowly subsided to first a dull ache and then, when I lifted and slid back down the second time, to that surge of sizzling heat. I leaned forward and kissed him, tasting him, my tongue tangling with his.



Strong hands, callused hands, gripped my thighs, holding me tight, his hard, muscled body shuddering under me as I again lifted up off him only to plunge back down, fully seating him deep inside me.

He tore his mouth from mine. "Oh God, Simon, you're so tight and hot, and I fuckin' love being inside you."

I smiled around the flickering orgasm that was beginning to roll through me. In the position I was in, his cock was rubbing over my prostate, which was making it hard to think. "You love being inside me? Since when?"

"Since forever," he moaned, and I saw the muscles in his jaw cord. "Whatever we do, you in me, me in you, kissing you, holding you... for crissakes, Simon, I get a boner just hearing your voice on the goddamn phone!"

His confession made me want to make him come so hard he saw stars. "Oh yeah? You want me all the time?"

His answering whimper was adorable.

"You love me, huh?"

"Oh God, yes."

I leaned back, feeling his balls against my ass.

"Simon," he whispered, reaching beside him for the lube, popping open the cap, lubing his fingers and then tossing it aside, caring only that he could touch me, feel me, and slide his slicked fingers over me from base to head in long, tight strokes. "Gonna come, baby, and I want you to go first."

Always he considered me; there was never a time when he had not. "I'm so close," I confessed as he started to thrust from the bottom, pushing in and out as my eyes fluttered shut. It felt too good; I didn't even care that he stopped jerking me off; I just let my head fall back on my shoulders, braced myself on his thighs, and let him thrust up into me.



"Fuck, Simon, you're so beautiful, and I can feel your body wrapped around me so tight, holding me, squeezing me.... Baby, please... come."

He was going to leave bruises, he was holding me so tight, and when he cried out my name, possessive and primal at the same time, I instantly felt the flood of hot semen fill my channel. As he drove up into me, I came, loud and messy and chanting his name.

I WOKE up in the early morning and realized I was alone. I smiled in the darkness, hearing him in the other room, walking around as I knew was his habit, checking the front door just to make sure it was locked. Make sure our home was secure.

"Come to bed," I called out to him.

He was there in the doorway seconds later.

"Why're you up?"

He was silent, just staring through the dark at me.

"Tell me."

"I dunno," he answered, his voice low, full of gravel. "I'm just happy, I guess."

And I understood. Simple things like his keys and wallet on the shelf with mine, his leather jacket hanging beside my peacoat on the wall rack, his messenger bag on the coffee table, mine on the floor, spoke of two people living together.

We had a home together, Leith and I, and I liked it, craved it, and so did he.

"I know this is stupid, but I just feel like everything is okay because I can come in here and see you sleeping."

"It's not stupid," I said softly, smoothing my hand over his pillow. "Now come to bed."



He crossed the room fast, and when he leaned over, I reached up and put a hand on his cheek. "Lemme hold you."

"I love you, Simon."

"I love you too, baby. Get in bed."

He crawled in under the covers and molded his body to mine, spooning me, his arms around my waist. I took a deep, settling breath and closed my eyes. I fell asleep smiling.



## IV

I WISH I had been able to stay happy. But by Tuesday morning, I was just foul. For starters I was away from home, having to fill in at the last moment for one of the other HR

generalists in my department. Leith and I had gone from bliss on Saturday to a hellish Sunday after my boss called that morning. My boyfriend wanted me to say no; I asked him when I had become independently wealthy.

He was angry.

I was defensive.

It didn't get any better after that.

Sunday evening was even worse than the day had been, like navigating a minefield, and we were both happy when it was over and we could go to bed. I was surprised on Monday that he was up before I was and making me breakfast.

"I don't want you to leave and us be pissed at each other," he told me as I wandered into the kitchen that overlooked a cramped patio.

I took a seat at the table and watched him move around the room. Already there was a mug of steaming coffee and glass of orange juice waiting for me. "You're mad at me," I said when he put a plate with what looked like a Denver omelet down in front of me. His looked similar except it was covered in salsa.

"I'm not mad at you," he sighed, taking a seat across from me. "I'm mad that you have to go, is all."

"You think I wanna go?"

He shook his head. "Just, I don't wanna fight—please."



The *please* killed the last bit of spite in me, and I rose out of my chair and leaned across the table. He met me halfway, hand on my cheek, his breath catching as I kissed him. Every single time I pressed my lips to his, the man received my attention like a gift. And because of that, I was putty in his hands. His long sigh made me smile.

"I just like knowing you're home," he said, kissing the side of my throat.

And I liked being home for him, but I had no choice.

One of my coworkers had been chosen to attend the conference instead of me, but his wife ending up giving birth two weeks early, so suddenly, because the spot was paid for, I had to go. The call came from my boss, and the look on Leith's face had been painful to see. It was hard for him when I wasn't there to come home to. The hearth of a warder was a precious thing. Knowing I was home was good; having me there when he got home was even better. To walk in and be able to grab me, that was the very best part for him.

So it hurt not to be home, and the training itself was going to be tedious, and to top it off, I seemed to be the only one that found the situation we were in, when Tuesday rolled around, to be in the least bit odd. As I stared out the window at the blanket of white, I took a breath and tried to breathe.

"Simon?"

I turned to look at my boss, Dan Brenner. There were four of us from the office there together; along with him and me, there was Jess Turner and Kenny Boyd.

"Jess said you were kind of freaking out." He gave me an indulgent smile. "You don't think you're taking this whole snowed-in thing to *The Shining* level for no reason?"

I loved Stephen King as much as the next guy, but really this had less to do with anything but the fact that no one but me saw the nightmare we were in.



He clapped me on the shoulder. "Mr. Saudrian, the hotel manager, has advised me that this sometimes happens this time of year."

"They get snow."

"Yes."

"In November," I said dryly.

"Yes," he insisted.

"Are you kidding?"

He shrugged. "I guess where we are, close to the California-Oregon border, that—"

"We're close to the camping grounds in Merrill," I told him. "My sister and I camped there once when I was—"

"It's just snow," he said with a chuckle, "and you're freaking out."

I cleared my throat. "Dan, we got here yesterday afternoon and it was clear, and in a matter of a twelve-plus-hour period, we are completely snowed in. That doesn't strike you as odd?"

His scowl was dark. "It's weather, for crissakes."

It wasn't; there was no way. Even though I was not a meteorologist, I knew the difference between what was possible and what was not. And maybe somewhere in the Midwest you got freak snowstorms that buried you from Monday afternoon to Tuesday morning, but this was northern California, and it was, as I'd pointed out to my boss, November.

"Simon?"

I forced a smile, because having a debate with the clueless man was not going to get any of us any closer to the truth of our strange situation. "Okay, Dan, you're right. I'm just bein' stupid. Where's Jess?"



He squinted at me. "I think she went to her room to change before we start the afternoon session."

I nodded and left him alone in the sitting room on the second floor where he had found me.

It was a huge hotel, very nice, very high-end, with polished wood floors and imported Italian fixtures and a whole sort of Casablanca-type feel to it. There was a fountain in the entryway and black-veined marble, and the staff looked crisp and clean in their spotless ivory uniforms. There was nothing wrong at all with the inside, the piano bar and the sports bar; the French restaurant was heaven—it was the outside that was the problem, where the strange built-up overnight snow was. It could not be there, not logically, not naturally occurring. If you could forget about the fact that we were basically trapped, it was fine. My problem was that I couldn't just put it out of my head.

Halfway down the long hall, I heard my name called.

Turning, I found one of the other members of my human resources department, Kenny Bond. He jogged fast to catch up with me.

"What's wrong?" I asked, because his face was all scrunched up.

He held up his iPhone for me. "I just—I can't get anybody. I'm tryin' to call my wife, and I have no reception up here. All the lines at the hotel are down, too, and the Internet and everything else. I just fuckin' hate this."

"Yeah, I know," I sympathized. "I'm on my way to get Jess. Come with me."

He nodded, falling into step beside me. It wasn't like him to be quiet, so I knew the whole isolation thing had him really bugged. As he walked with me, I felt the tension rolling off him.

At Jess's door, I knocked quickly.

Nothing.



I had tried again, thinking she was in the bathroom or something, when the door suddenly flew open. I jumped back, startled.

"Christ," Kenny barked at her. "What the hell?"

She lunged at me, wrapping around me tight and hard. I realized only then that she was shaking and panting.

"What's wrong?" I asked, hands on her face, tipping her head back so I could look down at her.

"Let's go," she gasped, squirming free, grabbing my arm and trying to pull me after her.

"Honey"—I pointed into her room—"where's your purse and laptop and —"

"Fuck it. Let's just go to your room and—"

"Jess." I cut her off, worried. She was frantic, panicked, her breathing shallow and fast. "You need to get your—"

"I don't need shit," she told me. "I'll wear one of your T-shirts or—"

"Stop," I said, soothing her, wrapping her in my arms again, holding her close to me, rubbing circles on her back.

She was close to hyperventilating. It took several long minutes for her to calm down. Once she had returned to her normal, composed self, I leaned back to look down at her.

"Talk to me."

Deep breath. "I was lying down on the bed, and something breathed on me."

I squinted at her. "Breathed on you?"

"Yeah, like an animal."



"You're kidding."

"You were dreaming," Kenny chimed in.

"I wasn't," she told him. "And I'm not," she answered me.

I agreed with him. "Honey, you had to be."

She shook her head and then pointed into the room.

"I'm not going back in there. Last night I didn't sleep a wink, and you know that ain't like me."

It wasn't. The woman could fall asleep anywhere, anytime. According to her husband, there had been a few very inappropriate times when she had nodded off when they were in the middle of things.

"Why couldn't you sleep?"

"I felt like something was watching me, looking at me."

Her breath hitched. "I just... I hate that fuckin' room, and I'm not going back in there."

"But Jess—"

"And right before you knocked, I couldn't get the door open."

"Oh that's crap," Kenny barked at her, pushing by us and striding into the room.

We watched from the doorway as he walked to the center and stood there.

"What now?"

She pointed at the bed. "Get all my stuff. I'm sleeping with Simon."

He squinted at her.



"Oh, you know what I mean! Grab my crap and c'mon."

He rolled his eyes like she was being ridiculous, got her garment bag and her messenger bag, and brought those both to me before walking back in to retrieve her purse and her princess coat. Those were passed to Jess.

"Seriously?"

She just stared at him as he stood there, him in the room, us out in the hall.

"Do you—fuck!" he yelled as his body jerked backward toward the bed.

"Oh God!" Jess screamed.

I bolted forward, grabbed my friend's hand, and nearly plowed into him. He had stopped moving so abruptly that the force I had exerted to reach him was overkill.

"Fuck." He clutched at me, eyes wide, looking all over.

"What happened?" Jess demanded, standing at the door, gesturing for us to come out. She was not about to step one foot back into the room.

"Fuck if I know," he said hoarsely, shoving me forward, fast, across the carpet and out into the hall.

The three of us stood together, clustered close.

"What was that?" I asked him.

His eyes were locked on mine. "I dunno. It felt like somebody grabbed me, like I was yanked into the room—did you guys see anything?"

I shook my head.

"No," Jess's voice cracked. "Goddamn it, I am freaking out."

"You felt like there were hands on you?" I needed to clarify.



"Yeah," he said, pushing up the sleeve of his sweater to reveal his forearm, "and now my whole arm fuckin' hurts."

"Oh shit," Jess moaned.

The skin that stretched from above his wrist to his bicep was covered in dark, angry red splotches. It was going to turn black and blue and looked like someone had given him the Indian burn from hell.

"What the fuck!" Kenny almost yelled, fisting a hand in my sweater, holding tight. "If you hadn't—I mean, Simon, I felt like I was gaining speed, ya know, and it hurt like a son of a bitch, but the second you grabbed me, it stopped. I mean, just stopped."

I nodded. It was weird, because they were both acting strange, and the snow outside was eerie, but everything else felt fine. Everything looked fine. Nothing was out of the ordinary.

"Okay, well, let's go to my room, Jess, and put away your stuff."

"And we'll stop at my room on the way and get mine,"

Kenny told me. "I'm moving in with you too."

His announcement was not appealing in any way.

"Why? What's wrong with your room?"

"It was cold."

"Cold?" I squinted at him. "Ever heard of a thermostat?"

"Just... it gave me the heebie-jeebies."

I rolled my eyes at him.

"Just c'mon, Simon."

I wasn't in the mood to argue.



THERE was nothing more boring than a conference about things you already knew. Refresher, they called it, but it was busy work, plain and simple.

We were there to take classes, brush up on our listening skills and conflict management while we interacted with other HR managers/trainers from across the country. Our company, Ellis Pharmaceuticals, put a lot of money and resources into its people, and the four-day seminar/conference was for our benefit as well as all the employees of the company.

After the three of us collected Kenny's things, both he and Jess moved into my room. There were a lot of products in the bathroom suddenly, but the counter was huge, so we were fine; cramped, but fine. The towel situation would have to be addressed, but Kenny was smart and grabbed his on the way out. We were late for the afternoon session, but the instructor, Mrs. Aoki, didn't give us much more than a stern look as we tiptoed in.

As class droned on, the feeling of unease left me. Hard to be scared or worried when you're bored to death. When we were dismissed for the day with homework for the following morning, we left quickly.

There were supposed to be drinks before dinner, and everyone was scheduled to report for a mixer around five thirty. Once we were back in the room, I watched Jess fall down onto the California king.

"You alright?" I asked her.

She rolled to her side to look at me, draping her hourglass frame over the quilt. "Simon, honey, your room is awesome." Deep indrawn breath. "It's warm and light and just... I love it."

"It's different," Kenny said from the window, and I looked over at him. "I mean last night, my room... I just I gotta tell you, it was weird."

"You ass," Jess snapped. "You were giving me shit and your room was weird too?"

He made a face. "I thought you guys would be, like—"



He raked his fingers through his thick brown hair. "I dunno, thinkin' I was stupid or something. It was fucked up. I haven't been scared of the dark since I was five years old, but last night... I turned on the light and I could swear—"

"That something was there right at the edge of the light,"

Jess finished for him.

"Yeah," he told her, his face draining of color. "What the fuck was that?"

"Did you sleep in the middle of the bed, afraid to get up?" she asked.

"No." He shook his head. "But I got up in the middle of the night and turned every light in the room on." He took a quivering breath. "Did you do that?"

"I was too scared to get off the bed," she confessed as she got up and walked over to stand beside me.

"You okay?" I asked when I realized she was trembling.

She leaned into me, wrapping her arms around my waist, her head against my heart. "I am now. I can probably even sleep tonight. Your room isn't spooky at all. There's no sort of dark places in here, and it's not cold. My room must have been like a meat locker."

Kenny nodded. "It was fuckin' freezing."

I had been warm all night, and I was crazy about my room. I had watched a movie, gotten cozy in bed, and fallen asleep.

"But it feels great in here," Kenny said, flipping on the TV. "Let's just hang here instead of going to the mixer after we do the bullshit homework."

"If you guys want." I yawned, ready to stretch out on the bed for just a minute.

It was funny how I lay down in the middle and both of them leaned against my legs. I muttered a thank you when Kenny pulled off my shoes.



That night we had room service and watched movies and played cards. When I woke up at three in the morning, I realized that the lights were finally off and both my friends were in bed with me. Kenny was sleeping facedown beside me, and Jess was next to me on the other side. I was in the middle on my back with her wrapped around me. I shifted, and she tightened her arm around my waist.

"I knew the moment I met you that I'd get to sleep with you someday," she murmured, snuggling against me.

"Go to sleep," I muttered, tightening my arm around her back. It was funny, but I would have wagered that everyone at Ellis Pharmaceuticals in San Francisco thought Jess and I had slept together at one point in time. We were just too close, the rumor mill said, for it to be anything but sex. As Kenny let out a snort, I had to chuckle. Seeing the three of us like we were would just have made the stories that much better. I hoped Leith was too busy to worry about me, since I had not called like I promised.



# V

I STAYED awake the following morning even though the session was enough to make me want to slit my wrists. The afternoon one was worse, and I was surprised at how many people didn't show, as well as the fact that a lot of others nodded off. And it was boring, yes, but normally, as adults, we didn't actually fall asleep sitting up. Looking around, I realized how exhausted everyone looked, like no one was getting any rest at all. Our trainer cut the afternoon session short because she felt that everyone needed to recharge their batteries.

As I sat at the bar having cocktails with Kenny and Jess, I realized I had not seen our boss all day.

"We should go check on him," I suggested.

"Sure, you do that." Jess smirked at me, coughing into her hand.  
"Brownnoser."

"Really? Is that necessary?"

"Yeah," she drawled, laughing at me. "But whatever, go look for him, and me and Kenny'll go check with the concierge again about Internet service and a phone line."

"Sounds good," I agreed, getting up and starting out of the bar to go find my boss.

"Meet at your room in an hour, and we'll get dinner!" she called after me.

I waved but didn't turn back around. Halfway to the door, I moved sideways to let a woman pass and ending up stepping into the path of someone else. I would have been plowed into by the stranger if another hand had not gripped my bicep and yanked me sideways.

"Careful."



My head turned, and I found there in front of me a very handsome man.  
"Oh hey, sorry."

He let me go immediately. "My mistake."

"Oh no, that's okay, thanks for saving me from gettin'  
run over."

"It's my pleasure," he assured me.

I offered him my hand. "Simon Kim, San Francisco office."

His smile was strained as he clasped mine. "Chale Diaz, New Mexico."

"Nice to meet you," I sighed, pulling back my hand. "Are you comin' in or  
going out?"

"Fuck if I know," he muttered under his breath, but I heard him, saw him  
shiver.

Reflexively I reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "You okay?"

His head snapped up, and his eyes were locked on mine. "Sorry, I didn't, I  
just, I can't—I need to call my...

partner... and I can't"—he cleared his throat—"reach him."

I gave him a warm smile. "I can't reach my boyfriend, either, and it's  
gettin' old."

Seeing the wave of relief that washed over him made me feel really good.  
"Yeah, it is."

"I'm off to check on my boss, and then I'm gonna have dinner with a  
couple of my friends. Would you like to join us?"

He nodded. "I would really like that."



As we walked we got to know each other, and I found out that he and his partner had been together for six years.

It had been rough going at first, as his boyfriend, Wade, had been a big-time player before he had fallen head over heels for Chale.

"You haven't lived until you've had to screen booty calls at two in the morning," he said with a snicker.

I enjoyed listening to him, and when he asked why there were bruises on my face, I explained about my ex.

"Oh shit." He scowled at me. "What did your guy say?"

"I'm not sure what he's going to do, but one of our friends is a lawyer," I said, thinking of Marcus Roth, or Marot as Jael called him. Of the four other warders in Leith's clutch, or group, he was the one I had liked almost instantly.

The man had the warmest brown eyes and a soft, resonant voice that soothed, I was guessing, everyone he met. He was deadly in combat, vicious in the courtroom and yet always kind to me. I was always happy to see him. "And the last I heard, he was on his way to file a restraining order on my behalf."

Leith had called me when I was on my way up to the resort and told me that Marcus would be handling the legal piece of dealing with Eric Donovan and that his friend Malic Sunden would be handling the rest.

"What does that mean?" I had asked Leith.

"It means that if I go see Eric then he might not live.

Malic is bigger and scarier than me, but because he knows he's powerful, he's really good about not exercising it over others. I might just go off; he'll just scare the crap out of him."

And I had no doubt. Of all of the warders in Leith's group, in his clutch, Malic was the one I most feared. The others were more refined, sleeker, but



Malic was a bull. I had been stunned when I met his new hearth, Dylan Shaw. They were polar opposites, but maybe that made sense.

Malic was hard and scary and cold, Dylan soft and sweet and warm. Malic was not a handsome man, and Dylan was brown-eyed, smooth-skinned perfection. He was one of the prettiest boys I had ever met, and the way he looked at Malic, every time he looked at Malic, left no doubt in anyone's mind that the big, surly warder was absolutely loved and adored. I didn't get it, but we had all seen a change in Malic that we liked. He was suddenly part of the whole, like Dylan loving him had fixed whatever was broken.

Finding his hearth had rendered the man necessary to the group. He was now needed and depended on, and the fact that Leith would purposely turn to him to help keep me safe spoke volumes. He trusted Malic to eliminate Eric as a threat but not kill him. It was a big step. Things had changed, and I was happy about that until Tuesday morning.

"I hate being here, learning crap I already know," Chale grumbled.

"I agree." I smiled at him.

"And this place...." He trailed off.

"This place what?"

"It gives me the creeps."

"The snow is strange too, right?" I asked him.

"Absolutely," Chale agreed with me, looking slightly panicked suddenly.

"The snow, everything—it's spooky."

It was more than that.

We took the main staircase up to the second floor, and when we turned the corner, Chale almost walked into a man standing there in the long hall. I yanked him back because I thought I saw smoke.



It made no sense, thick, gray smoke blowing forward and then instantly gone, not even dissipating, just evaporating. And I was thinking I was seeing things because, even though I felt fine, everyone around me was edgy and freaked. The weirdness was starting to rub off on me, and I was ready to let it go, assure myself I was seeing things, when I realized Chale was trembling.

"What the fuck," he half-yelled, stepping back, bracing himself, feet apart, ready to throw down.

"Gentlemen," the man said, but the end came out funny, like he gagged or choked.

I stared. Chale stared. Neither of us moved as the man stood there looking back at us. He looked pained suddenly, almost sad, and then his skin started to sag, stretch, and finally drip. I caught my breath at the first plink to the floor that wasn't water or even blood but was his skin dropping like he was made of wax and he was melting.

"Jesus Christ," Chale whispered.

I grabbed his arm and ran.

I was not the guy who thought long and hard or turned things over or didn't just act. So instead of standing there and figuring out what was going on, I bolted. Chale seemed to be of the same mind. Until we hit the end of the hall.

Flinging ourselves through the door, we found ourselves on the other side in what looked like a condemned version of the same resort we were staying in.

"What the fuck is going on?" Chale roared at me.

I tugged him along after me, not wanting to get separated, and we ran in and out of gutted rooms that cold wind whistled through, past scorched walls, blackened, peeling paint, and over carpet that enormous holes had been burned in. There were those plastic tarps over spaces where windows had



been, and they fluttered in the breeze. All of it, everything we could see, was ready to crumble and turn to dust.

"Simon?" he gasped, and his voice was high-pitched, scared, unhinged, and he clutched at my shoulder as we walked.

I had to get my bearings, but when something flickered on the opposite side of the room, I stopped fast.

"What?"

"Do you see that?"

"Hello."

We both turned to the voice, and there in front of us was a man. He was tall, classically handsome like a matinee idol from the forties or fifties, with slicked-back hair, dark eyes, and chiseled features.

"Welcome, gentlemen," he said, and his voice sounded hollow. "I'm Mr. Saudrian, the hotel manager."

I stared at him because he looked like he was made of plastic.

He smiled, and it was robotic as he reached for Chale.

My new friend screamed, and I grabbed the guy's wrist, intercepting him.

It was the stranger's turn to scream.

I didn't have time to even react before I was jolted, like the jolt you get when you fall in your sleep and it startles you awake. It was like I woke up and I was in a room that overlooked the now snow-covered courtyard.

"What the fuck was that?" Chale roared, staggering back, collapsing onto the overstuffed floral print chair behind him. He dropped down onto it, gripping the arms.

"And how the hell did we get here?"



I moved fast, squatting down beside him, my hand on his knee, trying to figure out what was going on. "Are you okay?"

"Not at all." His voice rose and cracked, sounding frantic.

He was falling apart, and I was pretty sure the only reason I wasn't was because of Leith and what I knew about his life.

"Just—we'll figure everything out, okay?"

"Simon?"

I looked toward the door, and there was a man I had never seen in my life looking at me like he was waiting, watchful.

"Yes?" I asked as I slowly rose beside Chale's chair.

He gave me a slight smile, just a twist of the corner of his mouth, as he levered off the doorframe he had been lounging against.

Some people, the minute you met them, you knew they were wicked and wild. He was tall, strong, powerfully built, with military style, buzz-cut short chestnut-brown hair, dark tanned skin, and smoky topaz eyes. The man just oozed trouble.

"Who are you?" I asked him, wary, as he approached me.

"I'm Raphael Caliva," he told me as he stopped, close, but not close enough to make me uncomfortable. "And I was asked to check on you by Jackson Tybalt."

Jackson.

I wasn't sure I knew Leith's friend and fellow warder's last name, but how many Jacksons was I expected to know?

And he had said the name like I should know whom he was talking about.

"Who?" I tested anyway.



He arched one thick brow as his eyes narrowed. The man was not handsome in a way that everyone would agree on, but there was something striking about him, something sensual and alluring and fiendish all at the same time. He looked, with his bedroom eyes and the swaggering walk, like the kind of guy who would bring nothing but heartbreak and pain... and heat and sex and lust. You saw him and thought about climbing into bed with him. I was immune, since I only got hot for one guy, but I clearly saw the man's appeal.

Chale saw it as well, if his sucked-in breath was any indication.

"You don't know?"

I had no idea what we were talking about. "What?"

"How many do you know?"

"What?"

"Jacksons. How many do you know?"

"One."

He winked at me. "That's the one."

I nodded, cleared my throat, and then turned to look down at Chale. "I just need to talk to him for a second, okay?"

"Go ahead," he told me, pointing to the opposite corner of the room. "Talk over there, just don't—don't leave the room. I'm not going anywhere without you."

I patted his shoulder before walking far enough away from him that he wouldn't be able to hear every word I said to my visitor. If he really listened, he would get most of it, but as he was working through a meltdown, I figured he had more than just me on his mind. When I stopped and turned, I found myself faced with Raphael.

"Who are you?"



"I told you already."

I folded my arms across my chest. "What are you?"

"I'm a kyrie." He smiled, and I saw the extended canines from every vampire movie I had ever seen.

I nodded. "You're the kyrie who saved Malic, right? I heard about you."

"Did you?"

"Yes," I told him. "Leith said you drank Malic's blood."

"Only very little."

"And now you're supposed to be in thrall to him or something."

He tilted his head and smiled, which made his eyes glow a weird orange color, like he was sitting in front of a bonfire or something. "In thrall to'," he scoffed. "Such antiquated terms your sentinel throws around and so infects his warders and their hearths. I am in thrall to no man."

"Then why are you here?"

"I was asked, as I said."

But not by Malic. He wasn't asked by Malic. "Jackson asked you to check on me. Why?"

"Because he could not come himself first, only second."

"I have no idea what that means."

He shrugged like he couldn't have cared less.

"So Malic has no pull with you, only Jackson."

"Only Jackson," he agreed.



"Why?" I pressed him, wanting to know.

"I will simply do the man's bidding and demand payment."

"Like what?"

"It's not necessary for you to know."

"It is if Jackson's taking care of a debt because of me."

"Again, you should not concern yourself with my bounty, only with your own safety."

"Why wouldn't Jackson just come himself, or Leith?" I asked, my voice cracking on my boyfriend's name. I had been missing the man before my world took a turn into the creature-feature nightmare, but now I felt like my skin hurt because he wasn't there to hold me.

The kyrie looked bored. He even yawned. "Warders can't cross over through façades, only demons and my kind. They can follow after I've found you, use the wormhole I create to reach you, but they can't punch through a dimensional door.

It's harder than you think."

"Is Leith coming here?"

"I'm sure he's trying now even as we speak. He was frantic to reach you but I came alone since, as I explained, I was asked to come look in on you."

I took a breath and let the knowledge that Leith knew I was in trouble fill me with peace. I should have realized that the man I loved, my warder, would have been worried when he couldn't reach me.

"Simon?"

But I had more questions. "A kyrie is what, exactly?"



He yawned louder, and his eyes watered. "I'm a bounty hunter, a tracker. Other creatures pay me to find someone or something, and I either kill it when I find it, bring them back a piece to show that it's really dead, or just retrieve the whole thing still wiggling."

"What do you need money for?"

"Everybody needs money," he said with a shrug. "I need it to wave around when I require information. I used to threaten people's lives, bleed them, but it's way easier to just slide them over a fifty."

He was so cavalier about his job.

"But now to you. Shall we go?"

"Wait; make me understand what's going on."

"With?"

"Are you kidding?"

He scowled at me.

"With all this." I gestured around. "What the hell is going on?"

He scratched his head, then rubbed the back of his neck. "Okay, so this is a façade."

I waited.

"All this that you see"—he waved his hand in the air—

"the walls, the floors, all of it is basically an illusion. It was all put up by a powerful demon to lure humans."

"But none of us were lured here. We came because we had training here. None of us would have picked this place if we'd had a choice."



"The lure was not for you, Simon Kim, but for whoever decided that your whatever-this-is would be here. Perhaps this hotel was chosen for the price or the fact that it was secluded, or that there were large rooms, who the fuck knows? But whatever the deciding factor was, that was the lure. Don't believe for a moment that this façade did not do precisely what it was meant to."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why put up a façade to begin with?"

"Didn't I just answer that?"

"No, you didn't. What I wanna know is why? Why put up this trap? For what purpose?"

"Oh, well, demons put these up to lure people in," he said. "Once they come in, they can't get out. After awhile, the façade peels, like this one is, and then it falls down onto a different plane with everyone inside."

"So you can come in, but you can never leave."

"Yeah." He smiled suddenly, waggling his eyebrows at me. "Just like that Eagles song."

I took a steadying breath, ignoring his attempt at humor. "So this hotel is going to plummet into the pit, into hell, and we're all gonna die."

"No, not into the pit; the pit is lower, that's the bottom of hell. This one is built over a hell dimension. Big difference, believe me."

"But we're all still going to die."

"Probably not die. More subjugation, slavery, degradation, that sort of thing."

He was much too matter-of-fact for my peace of mind.



"Jesus."

"Lemme see," Raphael told me as he sank down on one knee and looked like he was just staring at the floor, examining it. "Okay, so I'm right, this façade is built over a siphon world. So yeah," he said, looking up at me. "It won't be death; you'll just wish it was."

"What does that mean?"

He rose in front of me. "That means that this was built by a demonic lord who needs soldiers, so he's recruiting."

"Now I'm really lost."

He exhaled deeply. "Okay, so like I said, a façade is what this is. Humans tumble into them, or get invited, and then they get stuck like you are now. When the façade has been depleted of all its energy, like this one is really close to being, then it peels like an onion, layer by layer, until you have what you and your buddy were running through earlier.

What you saw before, that's what it looks like in here to me now."

I was stunned. "It looks burnt out and barren like it was gutted by fire."

"Yep."

"That's what you're seeing right now."

He nodded.

"Jesus."

Quick shrug from Raphael.

"How did you know Chale and I saw the façade all stripped?"

"I've been here for a bit."

"Why did you wait to contact me?"



"I was lookin' around. Plus, I can come in undetected, but when I leave everyone's gonna know."

"What does that mean?"

"Just listen," Raphael sighed tiredly. "You've got maybe an hour, maybe less, before this whole place is gonna fall like a runaway elevator and you're all gonna end up in a siphon world that looks a lot like Death Valley on crack. I'll bet you it's hot as hell during the day and freezing ass cold at night."

"God."

He grunted.

"And how long would we—how do we get back?"

Quick shake of his head. "You won't know that until you either find it yourself or you find someone that knows."

"Find what?"

"The way out, of course." He squinted at me like I was stupid.

He was really the most annoying man. "Am I looking for a door? A flashing neon sign? What?"

"Well, it won't be the sign thing, that's for sure," he said, grinning wickedly. "But there's really no way to tell."

Sometimes you stumble onto the way out, sometimes you find a guide, there's no real way to tell until you're there. It can be words strung together that make something seen that was unseen, I've heard of it being an equation—you just don't know. Only runners have charts of all the hell dimensions and they don't share well."

"Is that a kind of demon, a runner?"

"Uh-huh."



I really couldn't be bothered with what would happen, though; I needed to know what my immediate future held.

"Tell me what's going to happen once we fall?"

"Well, once you're there, you'll get attacked by demons, they'll bite everyone, and when they do, the true nature of each person will be revealed."

"I don't understand."

"That's what a siphon world is; it allows the hidden soul to come bubbling up to the surface. The bite of a lower demon there will either turn you"—he pointed at me—"into a demon yourself, or, if your humanity is strong enough, you'll remain you, and then you're dinner."

I shivered hard. I couldn't help it.

"But you don't have to worry about any of that, 'cause we're going."

"Why would demons want to turn people into demons?"

"We need to go!" he snapped at me.

"Tell me!"

"Fine. You wanna chat instead of run? We can do that."

"I need to know."

"Okay, for one, it's kinda their deal, right, the corruption of the soul, but mostly it's just for numbers. On the different planes of hell, there are territories, and demon lords fight battles for resources and land just like people do here on earth. It isn't any different."

"And these demon lords need soldiers."

"Exactly."



"Does this happen a lot?"

He shrugged. "It's harder to pull off nowadays, with technology, but c'mon, they still never found those people from the Roanoke colony, right?"

I sucked in my breath, and he winked at me.

"I don't...." I raked my fingers through my hair. "Shit."

"Now can we go?" he asked me. The wicked smile was back, and I realized I was being indulged.

"I have friends."

"No can do, ace. One passenger only." He yawned, rubbing his eyes again. "Just like warders, I can only move one at a time, and besides, the displacement wave I give off will probably peel the last layer and sink this thing into the siphon. That's why I've been hanging out. I can't just leave here unnoticed. You don't want to be here when I go."

"Why would you be noticed?"

"Kyries, like sentinels, and other travelers—"

"Travelers?"

"Any creature that can cross between planes is called a traveler."

"Can't warders cross planes?"

"They can follow, but they can't go themselves. If a traveler punches through a hole," he said, yawning, "then a warder can follow."

"That's what you meant earlier."

"Yes."

"Sorry, go on."



"Okay, so when I leave, I'm gonna create a displacement wave that, because this is a façade, everybody's gonna feel.

How close this thing is to falling, it really might be the last straw."

"There was no wave thing when you come in?"

"No, the punch *in* implodes, backfills the hole it creates, but the punch out has nowhere to go but out so it sort of explodes. That one you'll feel."

I shook my head. "None of it makes any sense to me."

"Why would it?"

"I can't just leave my friends here."

"I don't see that you have a choice."

But Jess and Kenny and Chale were counting on me, and something else popped into my head. "Why did I hurt that man when he tried to grab me?"

"What man?"

"When Chale and I were running, we—"

"Oh, that wasn't a man." He yawned again.

"Are you bored or something?"

"Fuck you, man, I'm tired. I hunt for a living, you know."

He was so irritable it almost made me feel better, more normal. "Okay. Tell me why, when I touched a demon, it burned him."

"The touch of a warder scalds a demon, as does the touch of their hearth, as the hearth is their heart."

I absorbed that. "So I can hurt a demon?"



"Burn it with your hand, yes, but not fight it. Hearths don't fight demons."

"Sure."

"But if you ever wanna test if your man loves you or not, go grab hold of a demon. If it sizzles, you'll know you still got it."

"I—"

"Let's go," he said suddenly, almost whining, grabbing hold of my wrist.

"No. I can't just—"

But he was cut off when we all felt the earthquake, followed by the sounds of people screaming from downstairs.

"Okay, hearth," he growled at me, but he wasn't panicked, more annoyed.  
"We have to make the jump now."

My idea of fun is not free-falling into a hell dimension."

When he finished, he yanked on my wrist, trying to pull me after him, but I planted my feet. It was only then that I noticed that I hadn't hurt him. He wasn't burned.

"I thought my touch would scald you." I was amazed.

He scoffed. "I'm not a demon, no matter what your deluded warder told you."

"All he said was that you tried to kill Malic."

"We've been over this. I needed some blood to heal; I was never going to hurt him."

I shoved him off me, and because he wasn't expecting it, I managed to free myself. "I can't leave my friends."

"Then you'll die," he assured me even as the room rocked.



Chale, who had run to the window when the first quake occurred—even if he hadn't told me I would have known he was not from California—slammed into my side, clutching at me.

"Simon, we gotta get out of here!"

I turned for the door and ran with Chale right behind me. We were joined instantly in our charge down the hall by the kyrie.

"This is madness, hearth of a warder," Raphael told me.

"I have to find Jess."

"Simon!"

I knew the voice. Stopping at the top of the stairs, I looked across the atrium and saw Leith. He was there with Ryan—or Rindahl—and Jackson—Jaka—both his fellow warders, but for me, he was the draw. And I knew everything would be okay. Leith would take me home, and Ryan and Jackson would take my friends. The kyrie could even take my new friend Chale.

"Run!" Leith commanded, and I yelled for Chale to follow me as I turned to charge around the terrace. I saw the people surge into the atrium, heard the screaming and yelling, the shrieks of fear. It was chaos, but Leith had come for me, had known intuitively that I was in danger. I simply wanted to reach him.

When I was almost to him, the ground beneath my feet fell away. It felt like the first downward drop of a rollercoaster, the moment where you lift up off your seat and then realize that there is only air around you.

Chale screamed behind me, and there was a rush of air as we plummeted. The images rolled over each other, Ryan suddenly at the center of a swirling vortex, diving toward Leith, whose face was flooded with fear, Jackson leaping off the balcony only to be driven back hard as Raphael grabbed him, his claws sinking into Jackson's chest.



I fell faster and faster, my speed increasing. I couldn't see Leith or anyone, and all the voices became one horrible howl of pain as the speed and lack of oxygen overtook me, and all I saw was black.



## VI

THE shaking was insistent, and when I finally opened my eyes, I saw Jess's big brown ones staring down at me. Her face was dirty and scratched, but other than that, she looked unscathed. Sitting up, I wrapped my arms around her, crushing her to me.

"Oh, baby, are you alright?"

She was trembling hard. "Jesus Christ, Simon, what the fuck is going on?"

Why was she asking me?

"Oh God," she moaned.

I pulled back to look at her face. "Did you see Leith?"

"Leith? No. How would Leith be here?"

"Never mind," I said, taking a breath. "Did you see Kenny?"

She only nodded.

"Is he dead?"

She shook her head and started crawling away from me.

It was only then that I realized that we were both covered in dirt. The two of us were in the entrance to what looked like a small cave. There were some rocks on one side, and I could see the furrow in the ground, which showed me how she had gotten me there. I had been dragged. But she wasn't big enough to—

"Simon!"

Even though my name had been whispered, it sounded like a yell. My head snapped around, and I saw Chale. He was banged up, his right eye was



swollen almost shut, and there were cuts and scratches on his face and neck. I was so happy to see him.

He grabbed me tight and hugged me so hard, ending up rolling over on top of me, as we were both lying down in the dirt. When he lifted up, I saw a tear roll down his bruised cheek.

"Thank you for helping Jess drag me here."

He nodded fast. "I'm not real sure where here is, but away from everyone else is better."

"What're you talking about?"

"Come here," Jess said softly, gesturing me to her.

When I rolled over on my stomach, my head swam for a minute before I got my bearings. I did the Navy SEAL crawl that they do in all the movies over to her, with Chale right behind me. We came up on either side of her and looked down the small hill at the craziness below.

I had never seen anything like it. There were creatures that looked like men but were definitely not. Some looked like Komodo dragons walking on two legs, like lizard men from some bad Saturday morning kids' show with guys in zip-up rubber suits. Except the suits looked real and terrifying and more like something out of Clive Barker's mind than Disney. Other creatures resembled bears, others like what I figured a werewolf would look like, but they were all doing the same thing: attacking the people in what resembled a giant corral. Off to one side there were two men who reminded me of Roman soldiers or gladiators in breastplates and those skirts made of leather strips. They wore guards on their forearms, but instead of sandals, both men wore boots made of fur that came to their knees. One had an ax strapped to his back; the other had a heavy broadsword hanging from a belt on his hip. They were enormous and primitive and scary as hell. The one with the ax kept gesturing to the other, and the creatures kept dragging woman after woman near them.



"I think," Jess said softly, pointing, "that the one with the ax wants the one with the sword to pick a woman, but the swordsman won't or doesn't like what he's looking at, so he passes."

"Unfortunately," Chale gulped on the other side of Jess,

"every time he passes...."

And I saw what happened. The creature holding the last woman suddenly turned and bit down hard into her shoulder. I saw the blood roll down her shoulder a second before she fell to the ground, convulsing, foaming at the mouth.

And then she changed.

The seams split on her clothes; her hair sloughed off as her body ran with reptilian red skin. She came to her feet seconds later, leaping at the creature that had bitten her, trying to behead him. One of the wolf creatures pried her off, and she turned on him, screaming and shrieking, her arms and legs and tail wrapping around the wolf as she tried to dry-hump him. He stroked her tail and wandered out of the enclosure with her.

It was then, when I followed him with my eyes, that I saw it, the orgy that was going on off to the side. It had first looked like the fight that was raging in other areas, but my mind cleared, and I saw what I was really looking at.

Creatures were falling on each other in a heated sexual frenzy.

Some of the women that were bitten did not change, instead remaining human. The bites bled, but shirts and sweaters stemmed the flow, and those women were herded toward another enclosure that looked like a barn from where I was. The whole thing looked like some medieval manor house, and I could see that there was an enormous outer wall that circled around us. I couldn't see behind the cave, but as far as I could see to the left and right, there was a wall.

"The men have all been either changed or not," Jess's voice was shaky.

"They did them first."



"Jesus," I groaned.

"Not all the women are shown to the swordsman," she told me, and I saw that several women were being bitten by werewolves. "I don't know why some are picked and some aren't, maybe it's a certain age he's looking for, or a type, but I haven't been able to figure out what it is."

Trying to figure out the reason was probably what was keeping my friend from going stark raving mad. Her brain, wrapping around a puzzle, was protecting itself from the total insanity of the situation.

"Maybe ax man has a preference and so he's showing only those to the swordsman... I really don't know."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," I assured her.

Her eyes flicked to mine. "At least you woke up," she said, and her voice quavered. "I was so scared."

"How long was I out?"

"Three days," Chale told me, looking over Jess's head at me. "I mean, hard to tell, but I think it was three days."

"Yeah," Jess agreed, and I heard the sob in her voice.

"You hit your head so hard."

I felt it then—the back of my head was tender. There was a large lump, but my mother always said, as it pertained to blows to the head, better out than in. She always preferred a big bump to no bump at all.

"I only started shaking you when I heard you moaning."

"You must've been dreaming," Chale chimed in.

"I seriously thought you were gonna die, but I kept putting water down you anyway," Jess told me. "Thank God you woke up. I was totally freaking out without you."



"Oh, sweetie."

"I feel so much better now that you're awake."

Her statement made no sense at all. How was I her touchstone?

"I missed you."

I reached for her and she grabbed me, pressing her body to mine, sighing deeply when Chale was suddenly at her back, the three of us wrapped together tight.

Jess sobbed silently, Chale was shaking, and I just held on. They had a three-day head start on me of horror, desolation, and hopelessness; I wasn't quite as freaked out as them yet.

When Jess and Chale finally let me go, I asked her where Kenny was.

She wiped at her eyes, leaving dirt smears on her face.

"He got bit and turned into a wolf thing. I don't know which one; I can't tell them apart."

"I can," Chale told me. "They put a strange breastplate on him; the metal looked like bronze when it turns that green color if you don't polish it."

I nodded. "At least I can distinguish him."

"Why would you want to?" Jess asked me sadly.

I put my hand on her face. "We're gonna get out of here, and we're gonna get home. You'll see."

She pressed her eyes closed tight, and I saw the tears roll out from under her lashes.

"Tell me what else?" I prodded her, wanting her strong again.



Jess took a breath, wiped at her eyes, and then fanned her face with her hand. "Okay, well, some of the people they took into that big house. I think they went in to work, but I'm not sure. We'd have to go in to know. And the first day, there was only ax guy down there, and then yesterday—oh, you've been out four days," she gasped. "Because for one day, there was only ax guy, and then for the last three there's been sword guy too."

"Okay," I told her, realizing I was thirsty. "What are you guys doing for water?"

She pointed back, and to my wonder I saw, of all things, big bottles of Evian.

"What the hell is that?"

Her smile made my heart hurt. "I was in the room when I felt an earthquake. I threw everything from the minibar in a pillowcase, grabbed the comforter, and stood in the doorway.

I grew up in Northridge, man. I know about earthquakes."

"You're amazing."

"I'm not, but you need to drink some now. There's six bottles there, that little round cheese, crackers, and some other stuff."

I crawled over to the bottles, which were deeper in the cave, picked one that was already open, and drained it. Just that little bit of liquid made me feel better. Sitting up made me slightly light-headed and nauseous, but after a minute, the feeling receded.

"Drink some more," Chale told me, "and eat a cracker if you can."

They went back to their lookout, and I opened a new bottle, sipped slowly, and ate a few Ritz crackers. My stomach couldn't take any more of either, so I made sure to twist the cap on extra tight and then crawled back over to them.



"So you guys have been camping up here all by yourselves, huh?" I asked when I was back at Jess's right shoulder.

"That's right." She shivered. "Camping."

"How did you guys meet?" I asked her, to try and infuse some sense of normal.

"I was trying to drag you," she told me, "and Chale was suddenly there, helping me. We met because of you, Simon, but Chale is my new best friend."

"Same here," he said, leaning into her, arms wrapped around her shoulders, squeezing gently. "We've had three days, no, four, you said."

"Four," she nodded, patting his cheek tenderly.

"We've had four days to bond.... She's the sister I never had."

"Okay." I exhaled. "So what's our plan here?"

"The plan is to stay hidden," she said softly. "I don't want to get bitten, and I have no idea what makes people change and what doesn't. I definitely don't want to be a slutty red reptile creature that wants to bang werewolves. It's one thing to read about hot guys who can shape shift, but all furry with the muzzle and the teeth does not sound like fun."

I had to agree.

"So what is—Jess!"

I saw it first, the stream of saliva or something that fell down onto her back. I rolled over, and there above us were two huge wolf creatures.

Jess screamed and bolted from the cave, but there to stop her, having snuck up on us, were three reptile creatures. I realized then that the cave was just up a small slope and could not have been that hard to find. They had just been busy before, four days of weeding through the crowd of people, and had finally gone looking for strays.



I rushed forward but was slammed to the ground and pinned under what was easily three hundred pounds of snarling werewolf. I heard Chale yelling as I was jerked to my feet. The three of us were dragged down the hill toward the corral.

The enclosure was muddy inside, and as we were shoved forward into it, I lost my balance and went down.

Chale was screaming, and when I turned to look at him, I saw one of the wolves preparing to bite down into his shoulder.

I felt a surge of protectiveness, and because I had fallen, no one was holding me. Rising fast, I charged across the small space and hurled myself at Chale. I struck him hard and he crumpled under me, which kept him from the creature's jaws. The roar from the wolf creature was deafening, and I rolled over, hands up, to fend him off.

But he froze suddenly, still as a statue in his forward lunge, an enormous broadsword embedded in the middle of his chest as he sank to his knees. I hadn't seen it thrown, hadn't heard it whistle by me, it was just there, as though it had been summoned by magic. I scrambled backward as the creature fell forward from its kneeling position and slumped sideways into the mud. Jess was suddenly falling down into my lap, sobbing as she clutched at me, shuddering in my arms. Chale was plastered to my back, the three of us huddled together as lizard men and werewolves made a circle around us.

I heard a growl, low, menacing, and when I lifted my head, the swordsman was there, yanking his weapon from the wolf's fallen body and wiping the blade on the creature's fur before replacing it in the scabbard that hung from his hip. When he turned to me, I saw that his eyes were completely black. It was like the pupil had been broken like the yolk of an egg and the ebony color had filled the man's eyes. The way he was looking at Jess was terrifying, like she was food.

"Oh God," I moaned. "I think he found the woman he wanted."

"It's not her he wants," Chale said through chattering teeth.



I had a second of understanding before the big man bent, fisted his hand in my sweater, and lifted me free of the others. I was dragged up against him, crushed to the hard metal cuirass as he looked down into my face.

"Let go!" I yelled at him, trying to shove him off me, to no avail.

He grabbed a handful of my hair and yanked my head back hard. I gasped because it hurt and reeled in his arms as everything spun. The hand loosened and he nuzzled my hair, inhaling deeply before he pushed at my cheek with his nose, tilting my head sideways. I struggled when he licked up the side of my neck, but when he just held me tighter, I stopped. He was massive and powerful, and as the top of my head only came to his shoulder, there was no way I was going to win a battle of strength.

"Please," I begged him.

And instantly, I was wrapped tight in his arms, held close, but tenderly, protectively.

"Simon!" Jess cried out.

I jerked in his arms, seeing a reptile creature grab her.

The barbarian roared and the creature froze, releasing her. And I understood: the man who had seemingly claimed me terrified the crap out of everyone else.

I moved slowly, wriggled free, and when I took a step back, he took one forward, wanting to stay close, his hand back to being fisted in my sweater. I stopped, smiled up at him, and reached a hand out to Jess. She moved fast, grabbing my hand, and he looked at her, his eyes narrowing.

I put a hand on the cuirass to show him that I wasn't going anywhere and heard him exhale sharply. When Jess reached for Chale, there was a snarl low in his throat. I lifted a hand to the barbarian's face and saw him lean into it and shudder.

"Jesus Christ, Simon, who the fuck is this guy?"



He dipped his head down so my hand ran up the back of his neck, and when he lifted his head, his eyes were back to being narrowed slits. He grabbed my wrist hard and dragged me after him. But I didn't let go of Jess, and she had a death grip on Chale. No one stopped us as he led me and the others from the enclosure and toward the manor.

The stench, the screams—it was overwhelming. I couldn't process all of it, and even when Chale was sick, he didn't stop, just threw up and kept walking behind us.

We reached a large, heavy, metal gate, and the monster reached under his breastplate and withdrew a long chain that had a key on the end. He opened the gate, pulled us all through, and then locked it behind us. Instantly I noticed a change.

"The meat smell," Chale said from behind me. "It's not in here."

"No one's screaming," Jess echoed him.

I looked around, and it was quiet. There were people dressed in togas, women and men, and they hurried forward to greet the man, bow low, and wait. The swordsman pulled Jess's hand from mine and shoved her and Chale at some of the people.

Jess started crying, but one of the women put an arm around her and tucked her into her side, stroking her face at the same time. The woman was clean, and so were the others, I noticed as I glanced around. It was definitely different behind the locked gate; it felt like a sanctuary.

"I think it'll be okay, Jess," I told her as two women stepped around Chale, their hands on his face, checking him over with eyes full of concern.

One of the women put her fingers together, motioning toward her mouth.

"She wants to feed me," Chale said, his voice cracking as he looked at me.

"Just go," I told them as I was jerked forward sharply by the man who had claimed me, nearly falling, stumbling before I regained my balance.



"Oh my God, Simon," Jess moaned.

"Just be safe," I told her. "Don't leave here. It's safer in here than out there."

She nodded fast as I was pulled forward again, this time winding up in the dirt. The barbarian reached down and lifted me up, and I was thrown over his back, carried like a sack from the quad.

A door opened, and I heard a metal gate scrape the floor and the creak of the hinges that allowed it to swing open. It was dark, only torches on the walls lighting a long hallway that had empty, unlocked cells running the length of it. It looked like I was being walked into a jail from the courtyard that we had just left. I heard water a second before I was lifted and thrown.

I hit the warm water hard and was winded for a moment, disoriented, before I figured out what was happening. I had been hurled into some sort of enormous heated underground cistern. When I pushed off the bottom and rose to the surface, I realized that I was basically in the center of a giant bathtub with steps around it. I was not stupid. I knew what he wanted.

I stripped off my clothes, shoes, and socks and let them float free around me. When I was tossed a small cloth and a cake of soap, I washed myself clean. Apparently the swordsman liked his food smelling good before he ate it.

When I was done, I stayed there, in the water, and watched him. Slowly, his eyes never leaving me, he started to strip out of his armor. The armguards were discarded, the enormous breastplate that covered a chest that should have been bronzed, and the leather-stripped skirt. His boots were last, and when he was naked, gleaming in the low light, I exhaled slowly. The man was a mountain of hard, rippling muscle, from the washboard abdomen to his roped thighs and calves. He was powerfully built and absolutely, stunningly beautiful. My breath caught just looking at him.

He gestured me to him, and I saw that his shaft was rock solid, precome already leaking from the tip. The man wanted me bad, and though he was



gorgeous, though I could appreciate the sight of him, there was only one man I hungered for.

"Is this inevitable?" I asked him. "Are you gonna rape me whether I come out or not?"

He whimpered in the back of his throat, and that was surprising. I saw him reach behind him and lift a small wooden bowl off a ledge carved into the wall. He dipped his fingers inside, and when he lifted them, I saw them glisten in the torchlight. It was oil.

"At least you're not planning to dry hump me," I said breathlessly, terrified just looking at his enormous cock. I wondered how it was going to fit inside me. I had only ever bottomed for Leith; he was the only man that had brought out in me the desire to submit.

Staring at the man whom I would not be allowed to say no to, I shuddered.

He grunted low in his throat, and the sharp gesture, the way his brows furrowed, showed me that he was done waiting; he wanted me out of the water.

I glided close, and he turned and pulled a cloth off a peg in the wall behind him. As I climbed out, he stepped forward and wrapped me up, hugging me tight, crushing me against him. I was dried off roughly, and when he was done, he smoothed my hair back from my face and looked down at me.

"Please don't hurt me," I pleaded with him.

He took my hand gently, lifted it, and placed it over his heart before covering it with his bigger, stronger one.

I sighed deeply. "That guy out there, ax guy, little did he know you weren't looking for a girl, huh?"

His eyes were dark pools of need, and when I lifted my hands to his face, he trembled under my touch. As I studied his face, his breath hitched, and he



licked his lips. It was as if he knew what was going... to... happen. Like he knew what I would taste like because he knew me.

But how could he?

His eyes were all over my face, and the look was more than just lust. He reached out, cupped my face in his hand, and smoothed his large thumb across my lower lip slowly, seductively, his lips parting in anticipation.

I jolted in his arms, startling him, which made him clutch at me.

"It's okay," I soothed him, and I saw his eyes bleed from black to the deep, dark ocean-blue that I knew so well. "Oh shit," I breathed out, because my guess was correct.

The giant standing in front of me was my warder.

I was looking at Leith.

Whatever happened in a siphon world had changed the love of my life from his normal lean, muscular self into a battle-ready barbarian. And he knew me but didn't. He knew I belonged to him, but that was all.

"You need me, huh?"

Leith bent toward me, and I understood that what he wanted, what he had to have, what was hard-wired into him and primal, was to claim what was his. It was my place to give myself to him the way he always willingly gave himself to me.

Lifting up, I wrapped my arms around his muscular neck and pulled him down into a kiss. If I had not figured it out before, I would have known the minute our lips met. No one ever kissed me the way Leith Haas did. It was gentle and possessive at the same time, his tongue slipping between my lips, tangling with mine, rubbing, coaxing, as I whimpered in the back of my throat, pressing my now hard, leaking shaft into his thigh.

The minute I knew it was him, my desire had flared to life. I felt the electrical current that ran through his massive frame. When he tore his



mouth from mine, he kissed everywhere, moaning out his aching need. Finally, at the base of my throat, he licked and bit, ravenous to taste me.

I was shoved back, turned, and thrown up against the wall. I heard the scrape of the bowl on the rock before his hot, oil-slicked fingers wrapped around my cock. I arched forward into his fist, pumping my shaft in and out of his grip. When he bumped my legs apart, I planted my feet and felt the head of his oil slicked cock press against my entrance.

It had started out as something unknown and frightening but had become, just as quickly, that which I hungered for. And it wasn't gentle—he wasn't going to take his time, and that desperate, hungry, violent need sent heat rushing through me. I was going to be taken, and I shivered in expectation.

He pushed inside of me, past the tight ring of muscles, the pain overwhelming and white-hot as he thrust hard into my clenching channel. I breathed through the burn and willed my body to relax, open for him, take him in because this was Leith, the man I loved. Even as outwardly changed as he was, his need for me, his desire, his want, was absolute.

As my slippery hole swallowed him, I felt a hand on the small of my back, and then his engorged penis slid over my gland. He squeezed my cock tight at the same time, and I cried out in pain and ecstasy.

I heard a deep, rumbling moan from him as he eased out almost completely before pushing back in slowly, inch by inch. His hand moved, and as he withdrew again, I felt his thumb slide inside me with his cock.

It hurt and felt incredible at the same time. I whimpered in the back of my throat, wiggling on the shaft now buried inside me.

He hissed out words I didn't understand, and I knew he was watching the length of him slide in and out of me, and it was driving him mad. He growled hungrily before he withdrew, hands clamped down on my hips, before he rammed back into me, his balls against my ass as he began pumping in and out of me as hard as he could. The unrelenting pace brought on deep, shuddering tremors, the sizzling heat from my quickly building orgasm starting to fill me up.



He grabbed my ass, spread my cheeks, and plunged in deeper and deeper, each hammering thrust more jarring than the last. I was stretched and pounded, and when I could hold on no more, I roared his name with abandon and came so hard I thought I would pass out.

Even as my legs buckled, he grabbed me and held me tight, driving in and out of me, pistoning inside as my muscles clamped down, squeezing him tight, my body collapsing around him in a velvet vise of heat.

He bit down into my shoulder, muffling his scream in my flesh as I felt hot come fill my ass and overflow. His hand cupped my face, and then he turned my neck sharply so that my lips could be claimed and ravaged. He bit, licked, suckled, and stroked my tongue with his own. The kiss was as brutal and devouring as his lovemaking, and I found that when he eased from my body, I was suddenly cold and shaking.

He turned me around and wrapped me in his arms, holding me gently, rubbing circles on my back. When he lifted me and walked me back down into the warm, caressing water, I didn't protest. As he held me, I understood what it was to be cherished. All the words he could have ever said to me would never compare with the truth he had just shown me. No matter who he was or what he was, I was still his, and he loved me.



## VII

HIS bedroom was huge, with animal pelts on the floor, a pallet for a bed, and an enormous fireplace. When the sun set, I was startled by the drop in temperature. Sitting in front of the fire on a thick fur, wrapped in another, I waited for him to return. He had led me to the room from the bath and carried me to the place I had not moved from. People—servants? I wasn't sure; I had ever seen them before—brought me fruit and bread and a dark red meat that I didn't touch. It could have been lizard man for all I knew.

When the door opened, I was shocked to see a very ordinary-looking man walk into the room. His clothes stunned me because they were so completely out of place. He was wearing a three-piece cashmere Ralph Lauren suit. I had one very much like it back in the real world where I worked and lived and went to Starbucks. It would have made sense at home, in the office, but here... here he was completely out of place. In the hell dimension, perfectly coiffed and accessorized down to a pocket square and wingtips, he was an anomaly. My mouth opened, but no words came out.

He sneered at me. "I had no idea that the hearth of a warder could be a man. I knew the only reason he was here, trapped, was because he had followed his hearth, and so I've been looking, searching... I brought woman after woman before him, had others hold them, and if he had shown even the slightest interest, I would have had their handler kill them instantly. The only way to truly change a warder, turn him into a beast, is to kill the hearth. And of course, for the trespass of killing their hearth, the warder would have slaughtered the handler, but that was a price I was willing to pay."

I just stared at him as I remembered who he was and where I had seen him before.

"I told my slaves that there had to be a hearth in among the filth somewhere, but never in my wildest dreams did I think to look for a man."



"Why not?"

"Why not indeed, I will learn from my mistake."

I pulled the soft fur cloak tight around me. "You're Mr. Saudrian."

"It is actually just Saudrian. No mister' needed."

I nodded. "You're a demon."

"I am more than a demon. I am a demon lord."

"What do you want?"

He shrugged. "I want power, land, all that any demon lord craves, as well as souls. Many, many souls." He sighed deeply, his eyes glinting in the flickering flames. "I wish I could fill a bathtub with them and soak, but alas, I cannot, only breathe them in one at a time."

It was an over-the-top declaration and somehow calmed me, annoyed me.

"I have done well, but unlike others, I have no warriors.

I used to have them—I used to train them and beat them and watch them be slaughtered or slaughter others in the coliseum, but millennia come and go, and fortunes change. I have had no champion in ages until now." He breathed out, and I almost shivered with the sound of sinister happiness in his voice. "When the warder toppled into my trap, I was astounded. How? It's unheard of. No warder would ever allow himself to be trapped in a façade and fall into a siphon. It simply would not happen. But when I saw him, held down by ten of my slaves, his eyes just aglow with hatred, I was overcome. I turned him myself, bit into him, drank his blood, his essence, and even though he killed many of my slaves, in the end, he changed and was mine."

I shivered thinking of Leith pinned down and attacked.

His was such a gentle soul, even though he killed demons. It had to have been a horror for him.



"Along with looking for his hearth, I have been sending woman after woman to him," he told me. "You need to feed and train your champion but you must also see to his sexual needs, make certain he's sated in every way. I sent sirens and nymphs, and nothing. I even sent my own mate, the dark witch Moira, and she too was rebuffed. I have had to have her chained in her quarters since that day, her desire to bed him almost as great as her desire to drive her dagger into his heart."

I watched him closely, waiting for the attack.

"I never thought to tempt him with beautiful men. I was shortsighted."

But I knew better. No matter how pretty the guy, Leith only wanted me.

He made a sound in the back of his throat. "I gave him the old ludus—"

"What's a ludus?"

"It's where you are now, where a lord trains his gladiators for the ring, or his men for combat, it's where you house them."

"It's a prison."

"It's an area in my home," he said snidely, "where I used to lock my fighting men, yes, but I gave it to the warder for his own use as he is to be my champion."

I nodded.

"But there are tunnels that he does not know of."

Which explained his presence in the room.

"What do you want?" I asked again.

"I want you dead, hearth, but now that you are claimed, now that he knows you're here, if you were to die within my walls, he would slaughter everyone here, including me."



I saw the dread in his eyes for only a fleeting moment.

"So now you will play your part, or I will have your friends raped and dismembered limb from limb. The pain, I can promise you, will be horrific."

I sucked in my breath and felt the rage welling up inside of me.

"You have no idea the torture I can inflict; I've had centuries to perfect my technique."

He presumed that I would let that happen.

"And I don't mean your friends who are now safe behind the locked gate; I mean your friend who now ruts like a stag in heat outside these walls, your man who is now a wolf. I mean your boss and more.... Do not think for a moment that I cannot leave here and travel to your pitiful human realm and bring people here or drop them lower into the pit. Your parents, your sweet sister—I can choose who I—"

"Fuck you," I snarled at him, feeling the anger flood me as I got to my knees. "You think Jael, Leith's sentinel, is just sitting there doing shit about finding him? You don't think that he's watching my friends and family?" I stood up fast, and when I did, he took a step back. "I'm not afraid of you, you asshole. You think we're gonna be here forever—fuck you! I will figure out a way to get out, and I will take my warder with me, and if you ever, ever, threaten me again, I will have him rip out your fuckin' lungs!"

"You are not allowed to speak to—"

I grabbed his forearm, and instantly he screamed from the contact. He shoved me back hard, and I fought for balance, hitting the wall hard, stunned for a moment. When my vision cleared, I saw him holding his injured arm; saw the blisters on his skin, the welts on the palm of this other hand, which he had used to push me off him.

"I may not be able to touch you, hearth, but I can pierce your heart with a sword, sever your head from your shoulders with my ax."



And I watched in amazement as he morphed from his magazine perfection to the ax-wielding barbarian. He roared as he came at me, and I ran. Halfway across the room, my wrist was yanked hard, and I was pulled into what felt like a closet. It was small and cramped, and I was suddenly face to face with Raphael the kyrie.

"Hiya," he said as he smirked at me.

"Holy shit," I gasped, looking at him, my face inches from his. "What're you... how?"

"It's called the tomb of Osiris," he told me, pointing away from him.

I jolted, realizing that the demon was right there beside me, and my hands fisted as I prepared to defend myself.

"Calm down," the kyrie said, his tone patronizing.

I realized then that even though I could see the demon, he could not see me. I watched with huge eyes as he walked around us, sniffed, and reached through me before roaring out his frustration and charging out of the room. "How?" I exhaled sharply, turning back to Raphael.

"It's why it took Isis so long to find her dead husband.

Their brother Set, he put all the pieces in one of these and spread 'em all over every plane of hell he could get to."

I just stared at him.

"What?"

"You're telling me that that myth, that myth is real?"

"Pieces of every myth are real," he said, squinting at me.

"You know that."

"I don't know that."



"How come?"

"Because I don't live in your world with demons and strange worlds and—"

"Don't you?" he challenged me, arching an eyebrow.

I went mute as I realized he was absolutely right.

"I never get you hearths. You go around thinking that somehow or other you can pretend like everything is how it's always been, all normal, even after you know all about the things that go bump in the night. Why do you do that?"

"To stay sane."

"Isn't it better to be ready? To know what could happen?

Be prepared?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe you should figure it out."

He had a point.

"But this is cool, right?" Raphael waggled his eyebrows at me. "The tomb of Osiris is the shit."

The man was astounding.

"You wanna know how it works?"

He enjoyed his own power, that was obvious. "Sure."

"Well, see, you come in one door, and if we open the one behind us, we're in limbo. So we're not gonna do that."

"How long can we stay in here?"



"Only a few minutes before the door just sort of dissolves by itself and we'll be transported to purgatory."

"Is that bad?"

"It's not *bad* bad; it's where I was created, after all, but there's nothing to do there but wait, and most people go nuts just hangin' out."

"How did you leave?"

"I'm made to get out," he said, like I was stupid. "I'm a kyrie; we hunt across planes, dimensions, rings. It's what we're designed for."

"So if you're here, does that mean warders can be here?"

"Yeah, no." He shook his head. "Only demons and kyries in siphon worlds."

"That makes no sense, Leith is here."

"Sorry, lemme rephrase, no warders that still know they're warders. Your boy is changed, he has no idea what he is or who he is beyond this place."

"He knows me."

"He knows what's primal; he knows you belong to him, but that's all. He has no idea who he is or even what his name is and that's why he can be here. He's a creature of the pit now, not your warder."

"He's still mine."

"Fine, whatever."

"How are we going—"

"Shit," he groaned, shoving me forward.

I felt wind on my back before I was suddenly in the room again, standing on a large fur.



"I have to pay closer attention," he said as he exhaled, grinning at me. "That could've been bad."

My eyes found his. He was unbelievable. My savior was a five-year-old boy in a man's body. "Do you have a plan to get us out of here?"

"Kinda."

"Kinda?"

"I have an option for you."

I threw up my hands. "And what is that?"

"I know where the cliff is, but you've got to get everyone to it."

"I'm sorry?" Talking to him was exhausting.

"Cliff," he repeated like I was impaired.

"Cliff?"

"Yeah, cliff."

"What cliff?" I snapped at him.

"Why're you yelling?"

"Just—what cliff?"

"The edge of this dimension, the jumping-off point." He grinned at me. "I found it."

He really was much too cheerful for my peace of mind.

"Do you ever take anything seriously?"

The way he went silent led me to believe he was actually contemplating my question.



"Well?"

He tipped his head. "I have something I want that helping you will get me closer to, so yeah... I can be serious."

"What do you want?"

His eyes narrowed.

"Tell me."

Quick puff of air from him. "I want a warder."

"Do you have one in mind?"

"Why, yes, I do."

I swallowed hard. "My warder?"

His face scrunched up like he'd bit into a lemon. "Are you kidding? There's no evil in that man, no blackness. How could I want him?"

"Malic," I said, because he was the hardest, angriest man I knew.

He snorted. "Have you seen Malic with his hearth? That man is as tame as a kitten."

I would take his word for it. Malic Sunden still scared the hell out of me. Though after my daytrip to the siphon world, I would have to reevaluate what really gave me chills.

"I don't—Jackson," I said softly, because I suddenly remembered our conversation from four days ago. "I saw you grab him, save him from falling in when the façade fell. He's the one who asked you to find me."

His eyes glazed, and I saw the wicked grin. "Yes."

"But he has a hearth."



"Does he?"

Didn't he? I had met Frank Sullivan many times myself.

"You can't kill his hearth."

"I don't need to." He shook his head. "Warders are hard to keep and even harder to love. A hearth must be strong to the core, and Frank Sullivan is weak. I cannot take what is freely offered."

"I don't understand."

"And you don't need to," he told me. "Just listen, because I can't stay. It's hard to remain here and keep my baser nature in check."

I saw it then, the beads of sweat on his forehead, talons where his fingers should have been. "You're changing."

"I am." He nodded, but he gave me a smile that showed off his extended canines that somehow were not scary in the least. "Now, ten miles east of here is the edge of this dimension. You must leap from the cliff within two weeks'

time, and that will take you back to the hotel."

"What? I don't—how can going down be up?"

He cleared his throat. "Have you ever gone scuba diving?"

It was the weirdest subject change ever. "Yes," I sighed, really annoyed and trying hard not to let him hear it.

"Okay, you know how sometimes when you're out far from shore and there are no markers, no reef, just you and the deep blue sea, and you think you're swimming up, but you're actually swimming down?"

"Sure. You just have to stop and watch which way your bubbles go."



"Precisely. This is the same thing. You're actually upside down, and you just can't tell."

"And so leaping down will actually be leaping up."

"Yes, but this world isn't stagnant like yours. It will change, fold in on itself, and then there will be no out, just a jump to another plane and then another and another. You'll be lost if you don't get home soon. The window to your home is very small."

"Two weeks is not a definite timeline."

"It's all I can give you."

"So what you're really saying is that we should go as soon as we can."

"I would."

I absorbed what he was telling me. "Okay."

"Keep in mind, as well, that the longer you remain here, the harder it will be for you to convince others to leave. Even now, your friend, whatshisname, the one who was changed into a wolf, he's gone. He can't come back from that change.

You'll have to leave him here."

"But why did he change to begin with?"

"It's his nature. Whatever truly lives in the heart will come forth with the demon's bite. Your friend Chale—had he been bitten, you don't know what would have happened."

"But all the people who were bitten and didn't change—"

"Their humanity is strong. It doesn't make them saints; they just know who they are."



"Like when a hypnotist tries to put you under but you remember your name so they can't."

"Sure," he grunted.

"Ten miles east," I reiterated, because I heard the raspy sound to his voice. His eyes were darkening, his smile changing from friendly to carnivorous. "Edge of a cliff."

"Yes."

"You've been here a while, watching me," I said, because from everything he knew, everything he'd commented on, no other conclusion could be drawn. "Thank you."

"I wish I could move you, but you're too far down for me to wormhole you out. Even Jael couldn't bring you out from this depth."

"That's okay; you gave me the way out, now I just have to convince everyone to go with me."

"Use your gifts, Simon, your natural gifts."

I had no idea what those were.

"And Leith, make him follow you," he said, as he winced with pain.

"I'm gonna try my best. Is there going to be a displacement wave when you leave, will Saudrian know you were here?"

"He saw me before the façade fell, and my scent is in this room now; he'll know I was here."

"He'll hunt you down."

I got a flashing grin. "He'll try."

"But, is there gonna be a wave or whatever? What'll happen?"



"No, there's no wave in a hell dimension, only on your plane. I can just leave from here like demons can come and go from your world."

"That's not comforting," I told him.

"But that's why people have warders," he said with a grimace, "to protect them."

"Go, go, go," I urged him, seeing the pain on his face.

"Hurry."

The muscles in his jaw corded, and I saw the veins in his neck bulge before he closed his eyes and disappeared. I wondered for a second what a kyrie wanted with a warder before Leith stepped through the door wearing what looked like a mink coat with a huge collar. I rushed across the room and flung myself at him.

He clutched me tight, head in my hair, rubbing his cheek on the top of my head.

"I missed you," I told him.

He rumbled deep in his chest, speaking words—maybe Latin, maybe ancient Greek; I wasn't sure—and slowly removed my cloak.

I looked up into his face and wrapped my arms around his neck. He bent to kiss me, and I felt his hands on my ass, cupping me before I was lifted up, held tight to his chest as he crossed the room to his bed.

He lay down, stretching languidly under me as I straddled his thighs. In either form the man took, the lean, toned, sinewy-muscled man I was used to or this new buffed-out Adonis, he was the same when he touched me: gentle, reverent. His hands wound into my hair, pushing it back from my face, and I saw the awe as he looked at my eyes. He was speaking to me softly, his voice deep and growly as I leaned down to kiss him.

He opened for me, moaning urgently into my mouth, and I felt his huge, throbbing cock pressing against me. I tried to lift my mouth from his to ask



where the oil was, but he caught my bottom lip between his teeth and nibbled, holding me there. When I felt his hands on my ass cheeks, spreading them slowly, and then a finger slide into my cleft, I realized that the oil was somewhere beside his bed.

Leith pushed inside me with his slippery digit, rubbing, pressing, before adding a second that came with more oil.

Tenderly, he prepared me, stroking deeper each time until he bent his finger forward and eased over my gland. It felt amazing, as did the strong hand he wrapped around my lust-hardened cock.

I leaned forward, away from his fingers, only to push back down onto them, driving them further inside me. The second time I rose up, when I lowered myself, a third finger was added, filling me and coaxing a choked whimper from him as my hands dug into his chest.

"Oh God, Leith," I barely got out, moving away from him, pushing his hands away so that I could take hold of his long, hard, thick shaft. I lined it up with my clenching hole and eased down inch by inch. He filled me, stretched me, and it hurt and didn't at the exact same time. He pushed up into me, unable not to, arching up off the bed, head back, eyes closed.

My slick, hot channel squeezed around him, held him tight, and as I levered off him only to plunge back down, his hands clasping my thighs made me groan with my own need.

He felt so good. When he opened his eyes to look up at me, I saw it clearly there in his passion-clouded gaze: he loved me.

"Do you like being buried inside me?" I asked him, pushing down hard, impaling myself on his shaft.

"Simon," he gasped, and I saw his eyes in that second of clarity.

I felt the smile explode out of me. "Yes."



He knew me. And even though his understanding was gone a moment later, it gave me hope nonetheless and made my heart swell.

He whined in the back of his throat, and I lifted up off of him, rolling over on my back in his enormous bed.

I laughed at how fast he moved and lifted my legs for him. Reverently, he eased them over his shoulders, leaning forward and curling around me before he pushed gently against my entrance.

"No," I ordered him, my voice low and filled with gravel.

"Fuck me hard."

He stared down into my eyes, and I pushed up so he would understand.

The first plunge took my breath away. He drove inside of me deep and fast, his cock buried to the base. It was always astounding to me that from Leith, and only ever from Leith, I craved this domination. I had never allowed anyone else but him to see me lose control, lose composure, watch me abandon all my careful restraint and lay myself bare for the taking.

He rocked into me, thrusting deeply into my clenching passage, holding my hips tight, not allowing me to move.

When he changed his angle, sending the length of him rubbing over my prostate, my back bowed as I came off the bed. I heard his rumble of satisfaction as he fisted my shaft.

The moment he tugged, his slick fingers gliding over my sensitized flesh, I yelled his name.

My orgasm tore through me, and semen erupted over his fingers, his wrist, and across his magnificent sculpted stomach. He fucked me through my release and then came as my muscles rippled around him, clenching him tight.

He collapsed on top of me, pinning me to the bed, his weight taking all the air from my body. I laughed in spite of the fact that I couldn't breathe, and



he whispered into my hair before he started to kiss me.

My mouth was savaged as he lifted up off me, kissing me hungrily, breathlessly, until I had to push him off me to suck in air.

"God, you're gonna kill me."

He tucked me tight against him, lifting my leg and pulling it over his hip, stroking my ass, his right arm sliding under me, curling around my back. He always liked to cuddle. On lazy Sunday afternoons, cold and rainy outside, I would be sprawled out on the couch reading a book, football on in the background, and he would suddenly be stretched out on top of me, head on my chest, eyes closed, content.

The man enjoyed being close, and I would need to remember that, remember that I didn't need to be so careful and correct and hold things in instead of sharing. I had to trust him more, and now that he was in the position to make me accept his affection, I understood how much he craved being demonstrative. I needed to thaw a little, and I would. When we got home... things would change.

As I heard the heavy sigh come up out of him, I realized how replete with happiness the man was. And while I was thrilled to be the cause, I knew that to get everyone where I needed them to be, I was going to have to scare the hell out of him. But there was no choice.



## VIII

THE next morning, after Leith dressed in his armor, I asked him if I could see my friends. He didn't understand at first, but when I took his hand and put the other one out, holding it like I had been the day before, he nodded. He left me in the room alone, petting me first, stroking my hair. Minutes later, Jess appeared with a tray of food.

"Oh God." She broke down when she saw me, dumping the platter on wooden table and rushing across the room to me.

She flung herself at me, and I caught her, tucking her onto my lap.

"I know the way home," I told her.

She twisted around to look at my face. "How?"

"We have to get to a cliff."

"What?" she gasped.

"You have to really listen to me now."

The way she was looking at me, vulnerable and scared but trusting, was almost overwhelming. I had her whole life in my hands, and just for a second, I was terrified. What if I wasn't up to the challenge?

"Simon?"

I had to try.

So I explained about Leith and who he was and what I was to him. I explained about what I knew and where we had to go and how I knew the only way for us to get home. As I watched her, studied her face, it hit me what Raphael had meant. My natural gift was this: I was honest. Everyone knew that if I could help it, I didn't lie. They knew that if I was their friend, I would do whatever I could. So when I changed everything for Jess Turner,



between where she was and what she knew of me, she accepted instead of screamed.

I watched her shudder, saw her make up her mind to trust, saw her nod, and felt her warm hand clutching mine.

"I want to see my kids." She sucked in her breath.

"Promise me I can see my kids."

"If you listen to me, you can see your kids."

"What do I have to do?"

"We have to make a plan, and we've got less than two weeks to bust out of here if we want to get home."

"Simon," she said shakily, "honey, I don't think I can last even a week here."

But she would have to, because we had to watch and plan and figure things out. There were items to collect and people to talk to. Nothing could be done overnight. "You have to be strong, Jess."

She nodded fast.

I was counting on her to inform the others, tell them we were making a break for it. She said she knew where Chale was. She would talk him into coming with us, though she didn't think it would take much convincing on her part.

"When we get home, I want to talk to Leith myself, alright? I want to thank him for saving me from that horror out there."

"Yes, honey."

She took a deep breath. "Okay."

"Okay. You trust me?"



"Of course, Simon, always."

And as she walked away from me, I had time to think about that. Why did people always end up trusting me?

I HAD the freedom that no one else had, so it fell to me to use that power wisely. During the day I wandered the ludus that belonged to Leith. I slipped outside with Saudrian's servants when they came to bring food for the champion, and even when I was found and chased back, not one dared raise a whip or a hand to me. They knew who I belonged to, and their fear of Leith was greater than my transgression.

I checked every room, watched all the comings and goings, stood at the windows and looked out at night. I had worried about wild animals, but there were none. It was a vast, barren wasteland, and the only thing that could kill in the desert was thirst. But ten miles was nothing, not really, easily done in an eight-hour period, or even faster, depending on the speed the others moved. I ran five miles a night three times a week at home; I was just worried about the people I was dragging along with me.

I found paper, a quill, and ink; I recorded events, made note of when guards changed, how late and early it was when people ate, drank, and went to bed.

Jess was ready to go, frantic to leave, her panic, more than anything, making the decision for me. When I told her it was time three days later, she had to clutch at my arm so she wouldn't fall. She was so thankful, and I realized that I could not be any more careful; there was only so much I could plan for.

We were all going to meet that night on the side of the manor house that led to the outer wall. I would lift the key from Leith and unlock the gate so we could run. Everyone had to bring their own water, and we would leave as soon as it got quiet and dark. We would be moving fast, but ten miles was a distance that was possible in one night for me and, the consensus had become, for most everyone else as well. I had tried to think of a better plan, but I really didn't think there was one. Waiting had given us the time to talk to everyone, spread the word to every human there of our escape plot. It also let me formulate a plan to try and save my friend Kenny.



I left Leith's room, as I did daily, wrapped in a toga that looked like it was made of raw silk and was not the dusky-brown color of everyone else's, but a pale red. The color afforded me a luxury that others didn't have: free rein to walk everywhere within the ludus. I still couldn't go out, only once having slipped out with Saudrian's food-bearing servants, but I could go anywhere else.

I found Chale, and he pointed out Kenny. The transformation was terrifying; he looked like a creature from a nightmare. But I had, I felt, one chance, and so I lingered, lounging in a chair under the shade provided by the second story of the manor house.

When I saw Leith crossing the courtyard from training all day—I had watched for a while from the upper balcony—I rose and sprinted toward Kenny. The wolf that he was turned on me, snarling, and I heard my warder yell at the same moment I grabbed my friend's arm.

Kenny howled in terror, and his fangs slashed at my bicep as he tried to twist free. I was afraid he was going to bite my arm off, but in the same second I prepared to release him, realizing that my plan had failed, he released a bloodcurdling scream.

We fell together in a tangle of limbs, rolling hard in the dirt, before my brain finally registered that it was a man who was wrestling with me and not an animal. I scrambled back and he twisted around, getting his knees under him, freezing seconds later as he blinked at me.

"Kenny," I said, seeing the armor hanging off his very human frame.

He was panting, chest heaving and eyes wide as he stared at me.

"Kenny, buddy," I soothed him, "you're gonna be alright."

His pupils were dilated, and he looked like he was feverish.

"This is all just a nightmare that we're living through. Come over here to me."



It took him only a second to make up his mind. He yanked everything off of him until he was naked. Moments later he was trembling in my arms.

Leith reached us, lifted Kenny by the back of his neck away from me, and hurled him away like he was throwing away a piece of trash. When he landed, dazed, winded, not moving, my warder went after him.

I ran at Leith, leaped, and landed on his back, arms and legs wrapped around him, and immediately started kissing up the side of his neck. He stilled in his lunge for a terrified Kenny and took a step back. The onslaught of my affection, my hands under the breastplate on his sweat-dampened skin, my tongue in his ear, my teeth tugging on his earlobe, made his step falter. When I slid off his back, he turned on me. I walked backward, and he followed.

Others called to him, and he answered absently, hungry eyes locked on me as I began yanking at the toga, freeing myself from it. I should have been embarrassed, flaunting myself, but I was saving my friend, so it was worth it. Leith let loose a volley of words, and Jess was there in seconds with three other women, one with the same piece of cloth everyone else wore, ready to wrap Kenny up.

Jess was crying as she grabbed hold of him, and he fisted his hand in her hair so they couldn't get separated.

"Keep him with you," I called out to her before Leith's towering frame cut off everything but him from my vision.

"I will," she yelled back. "I won't let him out of my sight!"

"Find Dan!" I directed her, my last order before I turned and ran.

I heard Leith growl behind me, and I sprinted down the dark, prison-cell-lined corridor toward the bath. As I rounded the corner, I felt his hand slide along my back, but I made it to the worn stone room and leaped, stretching my body out and hitting the warm water like a spear. I dove deep under the water, hit the bottom, and kicked off, breaking the surface half the length of the pool from my voracious lover.



He was tearing his armor away, hurling it into the wall, the door, uncaring where it hit and fell. When he was naked and heaving, he dove into the water, and I swam hard to the edge and climbed out. I saw his blond head bob up where I had been moments before. He pounded his fist into the water and yelled. I grabbed the cake of soap he had thrown at me a few days ago and threw it at him.

Silence.

The confusion was evident and endearing.

"Wash," I told him, shaking out my hair, grabbing one of the cloths from the pegs in the wall behind me and drying myself off.

We did not speak the same language at all, but he understood and so cleansed his massive frame from his hair to the soles of his feet. It took a while, and I was chuckling by the time he came out, his skin prune and scrubbed clean. I pulled two cloths for him from pegs on the wall and led him from the room and down the long hall to his private quarters. He held my hand, his fingers laced in mine as I tugged him over to his bed. I dried his hair, which he really liked, from the rumbling purr that emanated from deep within his chest. I made him lie back, feet on the furs, and I wiped away all the water. When I eased his thighs apart, on my knees between them, he lifted his head to see what I was doing.

"This is gorgeous," I told him, lifting his heavy cock in my hand, wrapping my hand around the base before I opened my mouth and licked the huge head.

His groan was deep and loud, and when I lowered my mouth over him, taking in as much of him as I could, I instantly felt his hand in my hair. I pushed it away, knowing he'd gag me if he was in control, and used my other hand to touch his balls. He jerked under me, and as I made everything wet with saliva, licking and sucking, using my hands, coating him, he came apart. Moments later he was shuddering with his climax, emptying into my mouth as I swallowed and swallowed, taking all he had to give me.



I rose over him after long minutes, when I was certain he was completely spent, and he watched me with narrowed eyes. Gently but insistently, I urged him to his hands and knees, and he let his head hang down as he shivered in anticipation.

The oil was beside the bed, but I wasn't ready for that yet. Instead, I leaned forward and parted his cheeks. His breath caught as I swiped my tongue across his puckered entrance, licking and sucking before I slid inside. His garbled words were raspy and broken as I plunged in and out, pushing saliva into his silky channel, before I added a finger.

His groan was fierce as he moved his knees further apart, inviting me, pushing back on my finger, trying to get it in deeper. I added a second and a third before withdrawing them to his stifled, desperate pleas. I leaned down, dragged my hand through the oil beside the bed, and then thrust the three fingers back inside of him to a gasp of startled pleasure. When I removed them, replacing them instantly with my cock, he dropped his face into the bed, muffling his yell.

His ass was big and firm and tight, not the one I was familiar with, but gorgeous just the same. As I thrust inside of him, I felt his muscles squeezing around the length of me, the pressure strong, pulling me in deeper. I leaned forward, my chest plastered to his back as I reached for his hand to guide it to his own hard, leaking shaft. Immediately he started jerking himself off, and I straightened behind him, fucking him hard as his yell filled the room. I felt the convulsion tear through him as I found my own release.

I stayed where I was, my groin plastered to his ass, and when I tried to ease back, he reached behind him to hold me there. I stroked over the small of his back gently, then down one taut cheek. He shivered with the contact.

"You don't remember, but your body does, and even though it's changed, it still knows me, knows my cock and loves having me buried inside," I told him, my voice gravelly as I gently slid from his body.

He flopped over on his side and looked up at me with heavy-lidded eyes.



I walked to the opposite side of the room, poured him a cup of what passed for water, and brought it back to him. He drained it in one gulp. When I took the cup from him, I turned to go get him some more, but his hand slipped around my wrist.

"What?"

He pulled me down onto the bed beside him and pressed my hand over his heart. He then covered it with both of his.

I nodded, bent, and kissed him. "I love you too, baby.

Just remember that tomorrow when you wanna kill me, alright?"

He looked confused, and I had no doubt he was. I was not looking forward to breaking his heart.



## IX

THE first part was easy. I had checked with Jess and Chale the following morning, after Leith left, and found everyone in pretty good spirits. Kenny looked better; they had found our boss, who could not stop apologizing to me. I had been right after all—the hotel *was* weird—and we were all a go for that night.

It was maddening, the waiting, and that night after Leith had drifted off to sleep after we made love in the bathtub, I stole the key from my massive lover. I lifted the chain up over his head, untangled it from his mass of dirty-blond hair, and hauled ass back down the hall.

I found Jess, Chale, and Kenny crouched in the kitchen, and when we went outside, everyone, all the people who were still people, were kneeling along the edges of the courtyard in the darkness. I saw a lot of what looked like animal-skin wine flagons, but I knew they were filled with water. Jess wanted to head up to the cave to recover the Evian bottles, but I told her we couldn't risk it. Besides, even though Raphael had been right and it was hot, it was nowhere near desert hot. I had lived in Phoenix for awhile, and the temperature was nothing compared to July in the Valley of the Sun. If the kyrie was right and ten miles was all it was, we would make it easily.

I used the key to get everyone out, a stream of people, and Chale went out in front, walking east, around the side of the manor house and out into the open. He was leading; I was bringing up the rear. When the last person was out, I followed, not locking the gate, putting the chain with the large key on it around the lock, making sure Leith could get out the second he realized I was gone, wanting him to see it there immediately. I had a terrible urge to go back in and wake him up, to get him to come with me, but I knew there was no way to make him understand.

I caught up with the others, unable to stop some from running, even as I saw Jess.

"What if they catch us?"



"What if there's something really scary out here?" I suggested to her.

"Oh for fuck's sake, Simon, I didn't even think of that."

"Yeah, I know," I told her. "Just keep moving."

"It's only ten miles," she reassured me.

"Which is like nothing," I agreed. "At home, we walk that easy, and probably walking though the Tenderloin is scarier than this is gonna be."

"Maybe."

"Maybe," I agreed.

She took my hand and we began jogging.

THERE is no way to curtail the desire to run when you're scared. So we ran in bursts of frantic adrenaline that crested and ebbed the whole night. When we saw nothing, heard nothing, mile after mile, I got scared.

I was terrified that I had trusted a kyrie with my life. I became breathless thinking that Leith had not even noticed I was gone, would not at all, until it was too late, and I would end up abandoning him in a hell dimension. Worst of all was my terror that he wouldn't even care that I was gone and would simply take another man to his bed. That thought lasted a good hour and a half before Jess asked me if I had been sniffing glue.

I told her I probably still had a concussion.

She told me I was just stupid and that I couldn't blame head trauma.

"Maybe none of this is real and I'm in a coma."

She shrugged. "Maybe we're all dead already and this is hell."

"This is hell," I assured her.



"I am so not up for some freaky existential debate about what's real and what isn't," she snapped at me. "Get it together, Kim, we've got people to lead to the Promised Land."

"Now I'm Moses?"

"An Asian version... yeah."

The banter was not helping.

Dawn broke and we stopped. Everyone sat down and drank water. Some of them lay down, and that was when we heard the horns.

Hunting horns.

I figured there would be dogs next, the baying that there was in every movie I had ever seen, but it didn't happen. But we were at the bottom of a hill, and up on the crest, we saw the chariots.

"Christ, it *is* like Moses," Jess exhaled sharply.

There were screams and cries as everyone was on their feet, running, the terror pulsing through the crowd, propelling them all forward at the same time in a stampede of fear.

I saw Saudrian in one of the chariots and identified Leith beside him. Hard to miss them—they were both huge, both their heads covered in metal helmets, the only difference being that one was carrying an ax and the other a sword. I shivered where I stood.

"Come on!" Jess yelled at me.

We started to run, and I saw the chariots begin down the hill as I checked them over my shoulder. They were leading the animal-people hybrids, wolves, lizards, and the bears that I had seen the first day but not since. They were apparently used for tracking and hunting.

"Oh my God," Jess yelled beside me, realization hitting her. "Leith—he doesn't know you're you, doesn't know who he really is, and so right now



he's thinking that you tricked him for the key."

"Yes," I agreed as we ran.

"Oh my God, Simon, he's gonna kill you!" She started to cry.

"Only if he catches me."

She screamed and rushed by me. I caught up to her, and we ran together fast. I heard Chale scream from up ahead and would have yelled at him to jump if he hadn't just gone ahead and done it.

I stumbled for a moment, overwhelmed at the trust, overwhelmed that he would just do something so ridiculous, so counterintuitive as to leap off a cliff into an abyss on just my say-so. Who the hell was I to inspire such faith?

No one stopped. They simply streamed over the edge like lemmings, and when I saw Kenny run as fast as he could and leap, arms stretched wide like he was free-falling into a pool, I went down.

Jess stopped, but I slapped her hands away and told her to run.

"No," she told me, grabbing my arm, lifting with all her strength. "Get the fuck up!"

It felt like one of those bad dreams, how sometimes you can't move, but I rose and shoved her forward. "I can't go without him anyway. Run!"

She hesitated.

"Your kids, Jess! Hurry the fuck up!"

She turned and ran. People streamed by me, and then I saw that the chariot was there, following them, streaking past me even as Leith leaped off, landing several feet away from me. His sword was drawn, his face was etched in pain, and the key on the chain was wrapped around the hilt of his sword.



"He's going to kill you, hearth," I heard Saudrian say from somewhere behind me.

"He's not," I promised him, and I turned and bolted for the edge.

I heard Leith's roar. Almost to the edge, I stopped and rounded on him. He lifted the sword fast instead of running me through. I saw the war going on inside, saw it raging all over his face, the betrayal, how much he hated me and loved me at the same time. He was shaking with his desire to kill me, the restraint costing him.

"Come to me," I demanded, gesturing him forward.

"Trust me."

He was in misery, and I saw his eyes redden as the tears welled up but didn't spill.

Saudrian screamed out words, and I knew without knowing them that Leith was being goaded to kill me. There were lies tumbling from the demon's lips, and I saw Leith react to them, saw him charge me, sword held high.

I did the only thing I could think of. I opened my arms and held them outstretched to receive him. "I love you," I told him.

He hit me hard. He was moving too fast, and he was much too big to slow his forward momentum. But there was no pain, only the arm that went around me, clutching tight, crushing me to his chest as he lost his balance and we went over the side.

"No!" Saudrian screamed, and as we spun sideways, I saw him lift his ax.

Leith saw it, too, and he flung his sword up. It caught the demon in his throat, and he fell back out of sight.

The wind was rushing by, and I held on tight, clutching at Leith, pressing a kiss to the side of his neck as we gained speed. I felt his arms around me, heard my name on the wind, and then the whistling became a scream. Then...nothing.







# X

I WAS wet, sitting in mud, coughing and choking on smoke.

There were sirens and a voice on a bullhorn, and as my vision cleared, I saw the hoses and the firemen and the chaos around me. I looked for Leith but saw no sign of him. I tried to get up, but I had no power, not a drop of stamina to rise. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and when I turned, I saw Jess. She was covered in soot, but she was in the Donna Karan suit that she had been in last time I had seen her before we had all taken the plunge into the siphon world.

Chale was on the other side of me, panting; he, too, was streaked in dirt and soot, coughing, but in his dress clothes as well. The three of us watched, as did Kenny and my boss Dan Brenner, as the hotel in front of us fell in stages to the ground. It was gutted by fire, smoking, burning, and slowly becoming ash.

"You people are lucky to be alive, as hot as that fire burned."

We all looked up as the fireman walked by us and, stunned, I began sweeping my eyes in every direction to find my boyfriend. He was nowhere.

"Call home," Jess suggested, and when I looked at her, I saw that she had already dialed herself, ear to her phone, listening. "Hi, baby," she whimpered, and her tears were instant, making clean tracks down her dirt-smearred face.

"You're not gonna guess what just happened to me. Put Daddy on, okay?"

I withdrew my phone from my pocket, amazed that it was there, and I would have dialed if I had not heard my name called.

Quickly I looked around and saw him coming toward me, my warder, moving fast through the debris. He was himself, long, lean, the carved



features I knew, the shining eyes. I could barely breathe.

When he reached me, he came down into my lap, knees folded on either side of my hips, sinking into the mud with me, arms grabbing me tight. I hugged him back, face buried in his shoulder.

"Oh God, Simon, I'm so sorry." His breath caught. "I could've killed you. If you want me to go away and never see you again, I—"

"Are you kidding?" I growled at him, fisting my hand in his hair, yanking his head back hard so I could see his eyes.

"You saved my life, you fuckin' idiot. Your love let me save everybody. Do you not get that?"

His eyes searched mine as I let him go.

"You—" I exhaled sharply, smiling wide, my hands cupping his face.  
"Jesus, Leith, do you get what we just did?"

You and me? Do you?"

He shook his head.

"Baby, we proved that we, we are way more than just good. I love you, you love me, and we're a fuckin' kick-ass team. I'm ready to do whatever with you. You wanna get rings, adopt kids, and buy a house? Whatever you want, sky's the limit."

His smile was huge. "Yeah? You're ready? Gonna be mine forever?"

"Forever and ever."

He was trembling suddenly as he leaned in and hugged me. "Finally."

I always was a slow learner.

HOURS later, at home, showered and changed, I was sitting on the couch while Leith finished up on the phone. He had been talking to Jael for close



to an hour. I had been surprised that I was the only one who didn't buy the raging-fire story hook, line, and sinker. Even Jess had reported to her family that she had been lucky to make it out of the inferno alive. When Leith finally joined me on the couch, passing me a large mug of steaming tea, I just looked at him.

"What?"

"How can they not remember?"

"Why would you want them to remember?"

"But some of them were so strong."

"And some were weak," he reminded me.

I cleared my throat. "What about those that got turned into creatures?"

He squinted at me.

"Leith?"

"Honey, when you saved one, you saved them all. A demon lord can't keep one or a part; he keeps all or nothing, that's how it is. A façade traps everyone, and so everyone falls together or rises together. If even one stands strong, then everyone's saved."

"So everyone came out."

He nodded. "A façade is all or nothing. It's the gamble the demon takes."

"Why would they gamble?"

"The odds are pretty good most days."

"How come Raphael didn't know that if you save one person that you save them all? How come he thought I would have to leave Kenny after he shifted into a wolf?"



"Love, kyries don't know anything about sacrifice or faith. How would they? It probably never even occurred to Raphael that you would stay there and fight for your friends and not simply leave with him when you had the chance before the façade fell to begin with."

"Would you have let him bring just me out? When you got there to the hotel with Jackson and Ryan, were you there just for me or did you plan to save everyone?"

He squinted at me. "I would like to tell you that I was thinking of the others, but Simon, all I saw was you."

"That's okay."

"It's not, my job is to save as many as I can, but in that instance I was selfish. I wanted my hearth safe first."

"Cut yourself some slack," I said, smiling at him. "It's human to want to save your own."

"But I'm not just human, I'm a warder too."

"And look what you ended up doing, you took care of everyone."

"You did, not me."

"It was us, make no mistake."

"I just didn't want to lose you."

I thought about that and then other things. After long minutes I spoke. "You killed him, didn't you? Saudrian?"

He scoffed. "With just a sword? Not likely."

"No?"

"Demon lords don't die that easy."



I nodded. "Will he come after you?"

"Maybe, but I'm never alone here, and he can't get into my home, so.... And now Jael knows who he is, and no matter how scary a demon lord is, they know better than to take on a sentinel."

"Jael's scary, huh?"

"Pretty much."

"Saudrian wanted you bad."

"But you wanted me more."

"Yes, I did."

His eyes were soft as he stared at me.

"Raphael helped a lot."

"Which will keep me from killing him the next time I see him," he assured me.

But I wasn't sure that Leith or any one warder could kill Raphael. I had a feeling he was stronger than they were giving him credit for. "Good, 'cause I kind of like him."

He squinted at me. "Kyries are not to be trusted, love."

"We'll see."

One of his eyebrows rose. "So now you're an expert on kyries?"

"No, just men."

I put my cup down on the table and listened to the rain outside.

He cleared his throat. "I have other news."



"What's that?"

"It seems small now in comparison but Marcus has that restraining order in effect against your ex. You need to call me and then the police if you see him anywhere near you."

"If Eric knew all about you, he'd be more frightened of you than the police."

After a minute, I realized that Leith had not responded and that he was moving beside me. Turning to him, I saw that he had put his cup on the table as well, and his eyes were suddenly wide, beseeching.

"What's wrong?"

"I am terrifying aren't I?"

"What?"

"I am, you saw what's really inside me. I'm scary."

"Not to me, not ever."

"I... how did you know that was me when I was so different on the outside?"

"I know you," I told him, patting my chest. "And I love you."

He moved fast, stretching out, lying between my legs with his head under my chin, arms wrapped around me. "I love you too."

Which I knew. "What are you thinking?"

"That whatever I am is okay, as long as you're with me."

I smiled, turning to rest my cheek on the top of his head.

"I'm yours, Simon. I belong to you."



"I know." He liked belonging to me; it was all he wanted.

"And you said you were ready to make plans, so I know what we gotta do first."

I sighed deeply. Leith sounding happy and content made me smile. "What's that?" I asked, getting sleepy, the warmth of his body seeping into me.

"We need to get a dog."

"Okay," I agreed, realizing that the man I was holding in my arms was the one I would have for the rest of my life.

"I was thinking an Australian Shepherd was just the ticket. I've done some research, and they get along with kids just fine."

I could not have been happier.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARY CALMES currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband and two children and hopes to eventually move off the rock to a place where her children can experience fall and even winter. She graduated from the University of the Pacific (ironic) in Stockton, California, with a bachelor's degree in English literature.

Due to the fact that it is English lit and not English grammar, do not ask her to point out a clause for you, as it will so not happen.

She loves writing, becoming immersed in the process, and falling into the work. She can even tell you what her characters smell like. She works at a copy store but has been unable to incorporate that into a book... yet. She also buys way too many books on Amazon.